

Emotion, Thought, and Estrangement: Emotion as a Cultural Category

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The emotion here is nothing but the feeling of a bodily state, and it has a purely bodily cause. [W. James 1967:110]

Emotions are the life force of the soul, the source of most of our values . . . the basis of most other passions. [R. Solomon 1977:14]

“Joy” designates nothing at all. Neither any inward nor any outward thing. [L. Wittgenstein 1966:487]

The extensive discussions of the concept of the emotions that have occurred in the West for at least the last two thousand years have generally proceeded with either philosophical, religious, moral, or, more recently, scientific psychological purposes in mind. This discourse includes Plato’s concern with the relation between pleasure and the good; the Stoic doctrine that the passions are naturally evil; early Christian attempts to distinguish the emotions of human frailty from the emotions of God; Hobbes’s view that the passions are the primary source of action, naturally prompting both war and peace; the argument of Rousseau that natural feelings are of great value and ought to be separated from the “factitious” or sham feelings produced by civilization; the 19th-century psychologists’ move to view emotions as psychophysiological in nature, with consciousness seen less and less as an important component of the emotions.¹ One of the notable aspects of this discourse is its concern with emotion as essence; whether the passions are portrayed as aspects of a divinely inspired human nature or as genetically encoded biological fact, they remain, to varying degrees, things that have an inherent and unchanging nature. With the exceptions of Rousseau, to some extent, and of Wittgenstein more recently, emotions have been sought in the supposedly more permanent structures of human existence—in spleens, souls, genes, human nature, and individual psychology, rather than in history, culture, ideology, and temporary human purposes.

In this article, I explore the concept of emotion as a master Western cultural category. An examination of the unspoken assumptions embedded in the concept of emotion is important for several reasons. In the first instance, those assumptions guide the investigation of people’s lives in social science, including anthro-

pology. Exploration of the cultural schema with which any anthropological observer begins fieldwork provides a methodological key, as translating between two cultural systems requires explication of the relevant meaning systems on both sides of the cultural divide. The cultural meaning system that constitutes the concept of emotion has been invisible because we have assumed that it is possible to identify the essence of emotion, that the emotions are universal, and that they are separable from both their personal and social contexts.

Secondly, to look at the Euroamerican construction of emotion is to unmask the ways in which that schema unconsciously serves as a normative device for judging the mental health of culturally different peoples. Despite an assiduous rejection within anthropology of explicit value judgments in the description of other cultural systems, we necessarily import a variety of Western value orientations towards emotions (as good or bad things to have in particular quantities, shapes, and sizes) whenever we use that concept without alerting the reader to the attitudes toward it that have developed in the West, attitudes that are necessarily invoked in the anthropological audience when the claim is made that "the Xeno people are prone to anger" or that they recognize fewer emotions than do we.

The concept of emotion has this and other sorts of ideological functions, that is, it exists within a system of power relations which the concept's use has played a role in maintaining. As we will see, emotion occupies an important place in Western gender ideologies; in identifying emotion primarily with irrationality, subjectivity, the chaotic and other negative characteristics, and in subsequently labeling women as the emotional gender, cultural belief reinforces the ideological subordination of women. The more general ideological role that the concept has played consists in reinforcing the split between facts and values as cognition, which can theoretically achieve knowledge of facts, is dichotomized in relation to emotion, which is "only" an index of value and personal interest.

The importance of the concept of emotion to Western thinking about self, consciousness, and society is evidenced by the dense network of cultural theories or assumptions that participate in everyday understanding and use of the word "emotion" and of the terms for the emotions, such as "love," "anger," and "boredom." These assumptions are evident in the number of sources of talk about emotion that the following discussion draws on, including both the everyday and the academic. In examining the cultural foundations of thinking about emotions, I will point particularly to the shared cultural assumptions that unite disputing academic theorists of emotion with each other and with everyday thought. While there are some significant ways in which those latter two types of discourse vary, the more important similarities between them justify treating them equally as products of contemporary social conditions and of the long history of Western thought on the subject. And while class and ethnicity are no doubt the source of important variation within the contemporary West in conceptions of emotion, the focus here will be on what I take to be a middle class Euroamerican model.

In this and further references to Western or Euroamerican culture, I am speaking about an amalgam of distinct cultural and subcultural traditions whose "unpacking" would allow for a better understanding of diversity in beliefs about

emotion. Gaines (1982), for example, has identified one important source of variation in theories of the person which is potentially very relevant to cultural beliefs about emotion; he notes two different kinds of understandings of the self and mental disorder, one of which he terms Protestant European and other, Latin European. Where I do not specify a more precise locus for emotion beliefs (for example, everyday thought, American academic ideas, etc.), I am hypothesizing a widely shared American ethnotheory of basically Protestant European, middle class background, which is evident in social science theorizing, everyday discourse, and clinical psychological practice.

Emotion stands in important and primary contrast relationship to two somewhat contradictory notions; it is opposed, on the one hand, to the positively evaluated process of thought and, on the other, to a negatively evaluated estrangement from the world. To say that someone is "unemotional" is either to claim that that person is calm, rational, and deliberate or that he or she is withdrawn or uninvolved, alienated, or even catatonic. Although each of these two senses of the emotional has played an important role in discourse, the contrast to rationality and thought is currently by far the more dominant and common use of the concept.

Emotion Against Thought

The contrast between emotion and thought goes under several other rubrics, including the more academic and psychological affect and cognition, the more romantic and philosophical passion and reason, and the more prosaic feeling and thinking.² The distinction between them takes as central a place in Western psychosocial theory as do those between mind and body, behavior and intention, the individual and the social, or the conscious and the unconscious, structuring (as do those latter contrasts) innumerable aspects of experience and discourse. Encoded in or related to that contrast is an immense portion of the Western world view of the person, of social life, and of morality.

It is first important to note, however, that emotion shares a fundamental characteristic with thought in this ethnopsychological view, which is that both are internal characteristics of persons. The essence of both emotion and thought are to be found within the boundaries of the person; they are features of individuals rather than of situations, relationships, or moral positions. In other words, they are construed as psychological rather than social phenomena. Although social, historical, and interpersonal processes are seen as correlated with these psychic events, thought and emotion are taken to be the property of individuals. Thought and emotion also share the quality of being viewed as more authentic realities and more truly the repository of the self in comparison with the relative inauthenticity of speaking and other forms of interaction.³

The contrast that has been culturally drawn between emotion and thought can be outlined initially by looking at the large set of paired concepts associated with the two terms and likewise set in contrast to each other. Thus, emotion is to thought as energy is to information; as heart is to head and as the irrational is to the rational; as preference is to inference; as impulse is to intention; as vulnera-

bility is to control; and as chaos is to order. Emotion is to thought as knowing something is good is to knowing something is true, that is, as value is to fact or knowledge; as the relatively unconscious is to the relatively conscious; as the subjective is to the objective; as the physical is to the mental; as the natural is to the cultural; as the expressive is to the instrumental or practical; as the morally suspect is to the ethically mature; as the lower classes are to the upper; as the child is to the adult; and as the female is to the male. Although individuals in the West of course vary in the extent to which they would emphasize the connection between emotion and thought and any of these other paired associations, each appears as a cultural theme underlying much academic and everyday discussion of the nature of emotion. What is clear is that the evaluative bias in each of the associated pairs follows that bias evident in the distinction of emotion to thought itself, that is, as the inferior is to the superior, the relatively bad to the relatively good.

Emotion Against Estrangement

The second major contrast set in which emotion plays a part is that of emotion versus estrangement or disengagement. The concept pairs that participate in the meaning of this contrast include life against death; community and connection against alienation; relationship against individualism; the subjective against the objective; the natural against the cultural; commitment and value against nihilism or morality against amorality; and the female against the male. While the emotional is generally treated as the inferior member of the set in the emotion-thought contrast, here the evaluation is reversed; it is better, most would agree, to be emotional than to be dead or alienated.

There would appear, however, to be a paradox—or at least a potential source of ambivalence about emotion—involved in the fact that some of the same concepts participate in the meaning of emotion in both contrast sets. The female, the subjective, and the natural define emotion in both its negative, unthoughtful sense and in its positive, involved sense. The paradox is diminished by a reinterpretation of those three concepts in the context of the contrast between emotion and estrangement. Where emotion is life, subjectivity is glorified as the source of perception and individuality; the natural becomes the pure and undebased; and the female emerges as the repository of some of the most important human values, including the value of commitment to others.

We can now explore in more depth some of these concepts which give the notion of emotion its complexity as well as its occasionally ambivalent character.

Emotion as the Irrational

One of the most pervasive cultural assumptions about the emotional is that it is antithetical to reason or rationality. Both a moral and an amorphous concept, rationality is generally used to talk about actions and ideas that are sensible, that seem sane or reasonable, and that are based on socially accepted ways of reasoning about problems. Rationality is closely related to intelligence, which in Euroamerican thought is defined as the ability to solve problems, particularly those

whose assigned parameters are technical rather than social or moral (Lutz and LeVine 1982). Both rationality and intelligence are taken as signs of mental vigor and of the potential for success in one's endeavors; both are morally approbated.

To be emotional is to fail to rationally process information and hence to undermine the possibilities for sensible, or intelligent action. Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame, whose emotionlessness is part and parcel of his superior Vulcan intelligence, is one of many examples in contemporary popular culture which express the contradiction Americans see between rationality and emotion (D'Andrade 1981:190). While it can be said that a particular thought is irrational and that emotions in certain cases make sense, everyday discourse places much more stock in the ability of thought to contribute to rational action; emotions tend predominately to lead to erroneous judgments and hence senseless or irrational actions. Although reasons why an emotion occurs may be posited, it is rare that emotion is viewed as reasonable, as problem-solving, or as rational; people tend to see emotion as a disruption of, or barrier to, the rational understanding of events. To label someone emotional is often to question the validity, and more, the very sense of what they are saying.⁴

It is clearly possible in this culture to make distinctions of degree with regard to the relationship emotion has with rationality (and with most of the other concepts described here). Some academic psychological research, for example, has made use of this less dichotomous view of emotion and reason in detailing how intelligent or rational performance of tasks is minimized only by an overly high level of emotional activation (for example, Emde 1980). This tendency can also be seen in the psychologist Lazarus's (1977) emphasis on the coping and cognitive aspects of emotion, and the philosopher Solomon's (1977) thesis that reason consists of reflection on emotion. What predominates in Euroamerican discourse on emotion, however, is a more binary view of emotion. One either is or is not experiencing an emotion; emotion therefore either is or is not an impediment to rationality.

The inherent irrationality of emotion leads, in this cultural formulation, to its association with the idea of chaos. While thought and rationality produce predictability and order, comparatively little rhyme, reason, or pattern are to be found in emotion and irrationality. This cultural notion is seen in common metaphors used for talking about feeling; we speak of having tangled emotions, of emotions swirling inside us, of exploding in anger, of the grieving person falling apart, or of being mixed up by virtue of emotional experience.

The chaos of emotion is linked with other features of the category beyond its irrationality. The chaotic energy of emotions makes them dangerous to anyone in their vicinity and weakens the person experiencing them, a notion we will explore in more detail in a moment. Emotion's chaotic nature is also the result of the culturally prevalent idea that, as Hillman notes, "emotion [is] simply excess, and as the excess of anything can be disordering, emotion [is] disorder" (1960:207).⁵

Rather than viewing rationality as intelligence and natural order, however, it is possible to define it more critically as the historically and culturally determined assessment of how a sensible or fully mature human ought to behave. Emo-

tion, therefore, becomes a residual category used to talk about that which deviates from the dominant definition of the sensible or intelligible. It is for this reason that the increasingly technical definition of rationality that has been identified as one of the primary ideological underpinnings of the Western states is simultaneously a rationality from which the concept of emotion is excluded. When the emotional is defined as irrational, all of those occasions and individuals in which emotion is identified can be dismissed; and when the irrational is defined as emotional, it becomes sensible to label emotional those who would be discounted. In this society, women, people of color, children, and the lower classes have been labeled emotional to these ends. The significance of this process will be explored in a moment in relation to the culturally drawn connection between the female and emotion. The process takes on added importance when we consider that moral and critical impulses are often inextricably bound up with emotional ones. Given this, the cultural status of women and of moral critique becomes as endangered as that of emotion.

Emotion as Unintended and Uncontrollable Act

Emotion is conceptualized as something wild and uncontrollable, something whose occurrence is involuntary. In everyday discourse, we speak of being swept away by emotions, of those whose emotions get the best of them, and of being under the influence of one's emotions. These metaphors are consistent with the view of emotions as biological imperatives; external or internal events trigger our emotional switches virtually automatically. Although we are generally required to attempt to control their expression, emotions are conceptualized as resisting our attempts to do so. Thoughts may, in somewhat parallel fashion, come to us unbidden, but they neither inexorably move nor distort the self in the way that emotions are conceptualized as doing, and they are more easily disposed of. Thus, emotions, in contrast to thoughts, predominantly *happen to* the person, and therefore are not fully intentional.

The notion of intentionality plays a central role in our view of the nature of individual responsibility. Any anti-social behavior that is less than fully intentional is less than fully reprehensible or punishable. The primarily unintentional nature of emotional response, then, has important consequences for American cultural interpretations of the emotional person. Although the executive or cognitive self may be called upon to rein in emotional responses (as when we advise other people to get a grip on themselves when emotional or to stop feeling sorry for themselves), if one is overcome by the material conditions of the self, which include emotions, responsibility is diminished. The dominance of the view of emotion as unintended and uncontrollable event is also clear in such phenomena as the readiness to acquit or countenance leniency for those accused of crimes of passion. This divorcing of the emotions from mechanisms of control and from individual will has been bemoaned by observers from Sartre to Kagan who note that this view of emotion tends to unnecessarily absolve the individual of responsibility for that behavior which results from emotions (Averill 1974; Kagan 1978;

Sartre 1948; Solomon 1977).⁶ It is important to note, however, that responsibility does not evaporate in the face of emotional experience and behavior. The general cultural devaluation of emotion has also meant that the person who displays emotion may sometimes be held accountable for that display. Those individuals, for example, whose failure to control emotion is viewed as characterological in origin are seen as having a weakness which, however congenital, is nonetheless blame-worthy.

A clear and interesting dilemma or contradiction is present in these cultural views. On the one hand, emotion is conceptualized as based in a physical reaction much like a sneeze or a burp; it cannot be controlled by thought which, being immaterial, is seen as operating in a separate realm of existence. Alternatively, we sometimes speak as if emotion *can* be reasoned away. This cultural ambivalence is evidenced in the academic and clinical psychological literature where cognitive therapies (Beck 1967; A. Ellis 1962) compete with drug or cathartic treatments for emotional disorders. In the former, painful emotions are conquered by the individual altering the way he or she thinks, cognition being more easily controlled and thereafter trumping (Bailey 1983) emotion. In the latter, externally induced organismic or subsequent emotional changes provide the main route to elimination of emotional pain, with the person's only responsibility being to submit to therapy.

Emotion as Danger and Vulnerability

Emotion is related to vulnerability in two ways. First, the emotional person presents a threat to the thoughtful person; and second, the emotional person is him- or herself made vulnerable by the experience of emotion. Let us explore each of these cultural twists in turn.

Because a rational individual does what is sensible, she or he is also predictable and, thereby, safe. The danger of emotion for the person observing it in the other lies in the belief that someone who is acting on the basis of emotional impulses is being led by an unreliable and senseless guide. Emotion is said to blind people (and we are blinded by both love and rage). Those individuals can be expected, as a result, to stumble crazily through social life, potentially harming the delicate and proper social coordination that has been achieved by the application of reasoned thought.

The danger of one person's emotion for the other also derives from the fact, just explored, that people who are emotional cannot be said to be in control of or responsible for their actions. Behavior that is not under the control of the executive self is behavior that can be expected to be less than fully socialized and, therefore, to be dangerous. The underlying assumption here is that the unsocialized self consists, in the main, of antisocial, self-serving, and aggressive impulses. The emotions are dangerous because they push against the restraints of the socialized, cognitive self. This image, elaborated in Freud's writing as in everyday discourse, is consistent with the association of the emotions with all that is pre-cultural and presocial, which is to say, with the natural in its brutish and Darwinian forms.

Emotion also creates, or derives from, vulnerability in the subject. People are conceptualized as being overpowered, buffeted, eaten away by, or at the mercy of their emotions. Emotions act upon the individual rather than vice versa; the person is thereby dominated and his or her weakness both produced and demonstrated by that emotion. People who experience emotion are also weakened by virtue of the fact that their behavior, being unreasonable, cannot advance them in the pursuit of sensible goals.

Emotion's link to weakness is an expression of the ideological role of the culturally constructed split between emotion and thought. It is the "weak" who are emotional, and although that weakness is often defined characterologically, it is the dominated members of this social system (such as women, children, and the lower classes) who are primarily defined as experiencing emotion, both in general and to excess. This purported emotionality, given its association with weakness as well as irrationality, is used to justify the exclusion of these individuals from positions of power and responsibility and to legitimize their disadvantaged social and economic positions.

It is also important to point out that the emotion experience can, by virtue of its force, create a feeling of strength rather than weakness in the individual. Sartre (1948) points to this phenomenon when he characterizes the emotions as "magical transformations of the world." This view of emotion, although not culturally elaborated to any great degree, is culturally comprehensible within the framework of the more positive social evaluation of emotion that occurs when it is counterposed to estrangement. When emotion is viewed as a source of life, it is also viewed as having the *powers* of life, as the source of all personal energy. The disengaged or alienated person, on the other hand, is one who has lost the energizing and interest-forming force of emotion. In losing this, she or he has lost access to the fundamental source of movement, purpose, and power in the world.

Emotion as Physicality

The concept of emotion bears a somewhat paradoxical relationship to the physical. Drawing, in the first instance, on the mind-body dichotomy that pervades Western thought, emotion is identified with physical feeling and the body in contrast with thought, which is seen as purely mental. This cultural view is evident in the predominance of physical images in talk about emotions (his stomach knotted up, she was fuming, his eyes popped out of his head); in the emphasis on the link between emotions and hormones; and in the linked contrasts of emotion and energy with thought and information. Images of emotions as so many B.T.U.s (and hence of an earlier, more primitive industrial age) contrast with images of thought as computer processing (and the more contemporary and advanced information age).⁷ Although both sets of images can be seen as reifying, thought is viewed overall less physically than emotion. When combined with the idea that it is via the mental that we have distinguished ourselves from lower forms of life, this factor represents another route by which emotion is devalued.

The emphasis on this association between the emotional and the physical is especially strong within 20th-century academic psychology. Take, for example,

the definition given by Tomkins, whose view of emotion is one of the most influential of the contemporary psychological theories; "Affects are sets of muscular and glandular responses located in the face and also widely distributed throughout the body, which generate sensory feedback that is either inherently 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' " (1980:142). Although cognitive theories of emotion have been developed more recently (for example, Beck 1967; Lazarus 1977; Mandler 1975) in an attempt to balance the former view with a concern for the ways in which cognition regulates emotion, feelings or perceived physiological state changes remain central to the definition of emotion in these latter theories as well. An example of this is found in the work of Kleinman who defines two types of emotion including "primary" affects, or "uncognized universal psychobiological experiences" (1980:173) which are transformed into "secondary" (and culturally specific) affects via cognitive processes of perception, labeling, and evaluation.⁸

Although this way of looking at the relationship between the emotions and the physical dominates in American culture, emotions are associated, in their positive but secondary sense of the engaged, with the spiritual and the sublime. To have feelings is to be truly human, which is to say, transcendent of the purely physical. Whereas emotions stand in close relationship to the instinctual when contrasted with cognition, they emerge as opposed to the animalistic and physical connotations of the instinctual when contrasted with what can be called the spiritual death of estrangement.

Emotion as Natural Fact

Closely related to the Euroamerican view of emotion as a physical event is the notion that emotions are more natural, and hence less cultural, than thought. This view of emotion is obviously dependent first upon the nonuniversal distinction, elaborated in particular forms in the West, between nature and culture (Wagner 1981; MacCormack and Strathern 1980). Culture or civilization is seen predominantly as a conscious, cognitive process; emotion then takes its place as the natural complement to cultural processing—as material which culture may operate upon, but which is not culture. We speak of emotions as raw, as wild, and as primitive forces; they are the natural, aboriginally untouched by the cooking, taming, and civilizing of culture. Needham, for example, sees the diverse vocabularies of emotion developed in many societies as necessarily wrong about the feelings they purport to describe; this is so, he claims, because feelings, being natural and universal, exist at a level that is unaffected by the cultural modes of thought expressed in those vocabularies (Needham 1981:23). The emphasis on emotion as physical feeling means that the transformations wrought by culture on the affective base (as on the physical base) become secondary as in Kleinman's formulation (see also Levy 1984). An interest in the emotional aspects of culture—in raising the (for us, paradoxical) association of the two concepts—has necessitated the introduction by some anthropologists of the idea of sentiment, or culturalized emotion, and the sharp distinction between it and private, natural feeling or emotion (see, for example, Fajans 1985).⁹

The ambivalent or multivalent stances taken toward emotion in the West result in part from variation across individuals and across time in the conceptualized relationship between and evaluation of nature and culture. Strathern has noted about this variability that

at one point culture is a creative, active force which produces form and structure out of a passive, given nature. At another, culture is the end product of a process, tamed and refined, and dependent for energy upon resources outside itself. Culture is both the creative subject and the finished object; nature both resource and limitation, amenable to alteration and operating under laws of its own. [1980:178]

Emotions are seen in fundamentally the same way. Thus, emotions are alternately the pliant material upon which acculturative and cognitive forces have their way (for example, in the theories of Beck [1967] and Hochschild [1983])¹⁰ or they are, quite literally in many theories of emotion (as Zajonc 1980), the energy which animates otherwise lifeless cultural forms.

It is the latter view of emotion that is particularly drawn upon when it is being discussed in contrast with alienation. Here the unemotional or disengaged is seen as an unnatural or cultural mode of being. While emotional response is still taken to be natural, the evaluations of the natural have a much more positive tone. Following the Romantic tradition, the natural (including emotion) is depicted as synonymous with the uncorrupted, the pure, the honest, the original. Culture, conscious thought, and disengagement are all viewed as disguise, artifice, or vise—as themselves the limitations which are more commonly seen as characteristic of nature and emotion. When emotion is seen as natural in this positive sense, thought and its offshoot, social speech, become seen as less authentic and less “really real”; it is only uncognized, unexpressed emotion that is truly natural, then, as it has not been reached and disturbed or warped by cultural conventions for the conscious experience or display of emotion.

This cultural view is evident in the speech presidential candidate Jesse Jackson made at the 1984 Democratic National Convention. Attempting to apologize for remarks insulting to Jewish voters, he asked that the public “Charge it [the mistake] to my head, not to my heart.” Jackson was saying not only that he “thought” rather than “felt” the insult, but that the attitude revealed by the remark was not his “real” attitude, not his natural way of approaching the world. His apologetic appeal could only be sensibly made if things of the heart (the emotions) are commonly seen as the true, real seat of the individual self and things of the head (thoughts) as relatively superficial, socially influenced aspects of the self.

It is important to add a secondary proviso to this characterization of Jackson’s apology. While his statement is consistent with and revealing of these American cultural views of emotion as the site of the true self, the appeal that it entailed may have had limited success in convincing his audience given some other aspects of those cultural views. In particular, Jackson may have disregarded the fact that such positive views about emotion and the implied denigration of thought are not appropriate for males in this society. A failure of the appeal to

convince most Americans is probably likely, as well, given the dominance of the more negative model for understanding the emotion-thought relationship.¹¹

The view of the naturalness of emotions is evident in psychological theory where, for example, Tomkins defines as “pseudo-emotion” any emotion which is at all socially constrained or suppressed, which is not “unconditionally free[ly] vocalized” (Tomkins 1979:208). Elsewhere, in Freud’s theories, emotion plays the role of the natural counterpart to the civilization of thought; for him, emotion is generated within its own domain, and thought (like culture) emerges, in Strathern’s terms, as “finished object.”

The culturally constructed naturalness of emotion has also had the effect of making Westerners less reticent about imputing universal emotional abilities to others than they have been about projecting particular cognitive abilities to all humans. This tendency to more readily infer what non-Westerners are really feeling than to claim that they are really thinking something other than what they claim to think is in part the result of the belief that natural processes are more invariant than cultural ones and, therefore, that emotions are both more uniform cross-culturally, and less culturally malleable, than thought. This view is developed most fully by those universalists for whom emotion’s naturalness has been further confirmed by such theories as the sociobiological or psychodynamic. Spiro (1953), for example, claims that the Ifaluk really feel anger or hostility though they mask it with fear. Freeman (1983) sees the occasional angry displays of Samoan orators at the island’s competitive speaking events as demonstrations of the natural rage that any creature feels after dominance attempts by others. Freeman’s analysis of Samoan behavior makes use not only of this assumption of the invariance of the natural features of humanness but of the notion that emotion is both natural and ultimately uncontrollable. In speaking of Samoan aggression in warfare, Freeman approvingly quotes from the ethnologist Kramer who, at the turn of the century, described how the “violent passions” of the Samoans were “set recklessly free” in wartime (Kramer 1903 cited in Freeman 1983:166). These turns of phrase obviously imply the naturalness—weakly controlled—of emotions. For Freeman, the natural (as the emotional) is the more active member of the nature-culture set; the following quote makes evident his implicit use of the cultural idea that nature’s emotions are also a dark, animalistic force.¹²

On some occasions the chiefs I was observing would, when contending over some burning issue, become annoyed and then angry with one another. By intently observing their physiological states . . . I was able, as their anger mounted, to monitor the behavior of these chiefs in relation to their use of respect language. From repeated observations it became evident that as chiefs became angry they tended to become *more and more polite* . . . Occasionally, however, the conventions of culture would fail completely, and incensed chiefs, having attained to pinnacles of elaborately patterned politeness, would suddenly lapse into violent aggression . . . [T]he conventional behavior is replaced, in an instant, by highly emotional and impulsive behavior that is animal-like in its ferocity. [Freeman 1983:300–301, emphasis in original]

In sum, emotions are primarily conceived of as pre-cultural facts, as features of our biological heritage that can be identified independently of our cultural her-

itage. Although there is variation in the evaluation of the impact of culture and the natural substrate of our emotions on each other, the element of natural emotion counterposes itself to either the civilization of thought or the social disease of alienation and forms the basis for much everyday and academic talk about emotions. The questions that are then asked concern the relationship between a natural fact—the affective response—and the cultural facts, including cultural beliefs and social institutions.

Emotion as Subjectivity

Emotions are viewed as constituting subjectivity in several of the senses in which the term subjective is used.¹³ In the first instance, they are subjective in the sense of biased. To say of individuals that they are acting emotionally is to say that they are acting on the basis of a personal interest which is inconsistent with the wider interest they ought to consider. From this perspective, emotion necessarily creates bias in a way that thought does not; while thought may be subjective in the sense of consisting of individual and unique perceptions, it does not by its nature distort judgment as emotion does. Emotion, as we have noted, blinds the individual to judgments that she or he ought to make, causing thereby both a failure of perception and potential social disruption. As bias pushes individuals to pursue goals that accord only with their own view, the emotional/subjective person can potentially thwart the attainment of more global, social, objectively determined and valid goals.

The second sense in which the emotions are subjective consists of the notion that emotions constitute the perspective of the individual on events. This notion has several implications which are more positive than those associated with bias. In particular, the subjectivity of emotions in this sense gives them a fundamental—even sacred—role in individuating the person. Given the importance, in the American value system, of the individual personality, this aspect of emotion elevates them to a special place.

The emotions create the possibility for this individuality in at least two senses. First, they constitute individual opinion. It is only I who have these particular emotions, opinions, and values. From this perspective, emotions are Me in a way that thoughts are not. As thoughts may be objective, they will be the same in whatever mind they appear. Feelings, however, are subjective; they therefore are not completely communicable, and very possibly are uniquely my own. It is, then, impossible, in the parlance of this culture, to speak literally about *our* emotions or, conversely, to speak of someone as an individual who is not unique, a uniqueness which is achieved in part through one's emotions.

Secondly, the emotions stand for individual privacy or inviolability. Feelings, it is thought, cannot truly or absolutely be known except through self-revelation, that is, except through a decision on the part of the individual who experiences the emotion to discuss it. It is not possible to ascertain conclusively what someone else is feeling solely on the basis of observation.¹⁴ Americans will in fact often react vehemently to any attempt that is construed as "telling me what

I feel''; only the subject can truly know his or her own emotions. Self-revelation of emotion is made necessary and problematic, first, by the fact that it is considered much more difficult to accurately communicate one's feelings than one's thoughts (since thoughts can be objective) and, second, by the fact that the emotions are treated as the private property of the self. Individuals are sacred only insofar as each of them own their particular and distinct set of emotions.

Emotion as Female

American culture brims with images and discussions of the emotionality of women. Women are much more likely than men to be portrayed crying in movies and smiling broadly in advertisements. Similarly, the classic justification for the traditional exclusion of women from the office of the American Presidency has prominently included the notion that women are "too emotional." Attitude surveys have demonstrated that Americans believe that women are both more intrinsically emotional and more emotionally expressive than men. Women are also thought to be better able to consciously control or manipulate their feelings—"to have the capacity to premeditate a sigh, an outburst of tears, or a flight of joy" (Hochschild 1983:164). Studies also show that men, who in general hold more extreme gender role stereotypes (Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria 1974), see women as more emotional than women see themselves. This belief may do much to organize important social evaluations. Intense and sometimes adverse public speculation arose, for example, when Jacqueline Kennedy failed to cry at her husband's funeral. More striking was the scorn that greeted the report that Edmund Muskie cried publically in the midst of his presidential campaign.¹⁵

American cultural belief does not deny that men may become emotional; it does, however, engender expectations that men will experience only certain types of emotion, notably anger. Women are expected to experience the entire range of emotions more frequently and deeply, with the possible exception of anger. Hochschild has pointed out that men's emotions are also interpreted differently than those of women. A man's anger will usually be seen as more important (that is, as requiring attention) simply by virtue of the fact that he is culturally defined as a more important person. The emotions of men are also seen as more explicable in terms of the situation in which they find themselves, (that is, the anger is seen as "called for" by the context in which it occurred (Hochschild 1983:172-173). While women's emotion is seen as characterological, men's is seen (when it occurs) as situational and, hence, sensible.

It is clear that these cultural beliefs are also found in force in the clinical and academic psychological communities. Garai (1970), for example, claims that women are "naturally" more emotional than men, that "the stronger aggressiveness of males and the greater susceptibility of females to fear appear to have a genetic origin" (Garai 1970:126). An experimental study by Broverman, Broverman, and Clarkson (1970) found that clinical psychologists in the United States describe "healthy" women as more excitable and emotional than men, as having their feelings more easily hurt, and as being less objective (and for that reason

disliking math and science). Moreover, the traits seen as indicative of mental health in a male not only diverged from those considered normal or usual in a female but were virtually indistinguishable from those seen by the clinicians as healthy in an adult whose gender was unspecified.

It is from the more general cultural theories about the nature of women and emotion that Parsons and Bales (1955) drew the categories with which they characterized male and female roles within the family. This study, one of the most widely cited in the post-World War II sociological literature on gender, describes women as "expressive" (or emotional) and men as "instrumental" (read pragmatic, utilitarian, rational, cognitive). Parsons and Bales claim that a woman's expressiveness is linked to and required by the necessity that she be a "willing and 'accommodating' person" (1955:51), thereby being supportive of the male in his role of "technical performer" (1955:51). This cultural order of concepts is presented by these sociologists as the scientific, or natural, order of things. Such "naturalization" of *any* social fact is the ideological strategy par excellence; this is evident in the academic and everyday portrayal of the sources of gender roles, of performance on I.Q. tests, and of the formation of socioeconomic classes.

Most of the concepts associated with emotion, including particularly irrationality, are implied by the statement that "women are more emotional than men." When women are said to be emotional, their inferiority is also generally asserted given the general cultural devaluation of the concept of emotion. It should be noted that I am not claiming that the negative evaluation of the emotion concept leads to a negative evaluation of women because women are (objectively) emotional but rather that the ideologies of gender and of self and emotion reinforce each other on the question of where weakness and inferiority are to be found. The socially and ideologically weak position of women is indexed by the company that they keep when emotion ascription takes place. For example, Havelock Ellis (1929) noted that among women, "as among children, savages, and nervous subjects," the emotions are dominant reflexes. Although his statement is dated, it mirrors the common and contemporary cultural association between the female, the subordinate, and the emotional.

The association of the female with the emotions is reinforced by the naturalness that the two purportedly share. The view of men and of cognition as each more cultural and more civilized contrasts with the primeval associations of the concepts of the female, the emotions, and nature, each of which is simpler, more primitive, and more anti-structural than the male, cognition, and culture. Women's greater naturalness is thought by many in this culture to derive from their child bearing and child rearing roles (for example, Ortner 1974). More importantly, the portrait of the natural women is painted with the implicit use of the cultural notion that the achievements of nature are overshadowed by the achievements of civilization.

The dual interpretations that have been applied to the concept of nature take on the same important role here in constructing the female. Women, like their emotionality, have been seen alternately as pure or as debased by virtue of their naturalness. On the one hand, nature is weak, making women (and emotion)

weak. We speak of fragile ecosystems and of a distraught woman being in a fragile state. The weakness of women, nature, and emotion, then, requires protection and control. A woman's emotionality, originally attributed to the greater internal mobility of her bodily organs, and particularly her uterus, is today associated with the hormones. A woman's naturalness may make her, on the other hand, strong and dangerous, although no more positively evaluated; shifting uteri and hormones wreak the same havoc as thunderstorms, avalanches, and other natural phenomena. Nature, it is said, has less fury than a woman scorned, that is, than a woman who is emotionally upset. The ambivalence that the association between women and nature generates is clear in contemporary Euroamerican thought as it was in the discourse of 18th- and 19th-century Britain and France, a discourse that Jordanova says characterized women as at once "tougher *and* softer, more vulnerable *and* more tenacious of life than men" (1980:49).

Contrast the ideologically dominant view of the relationship between women and emotion that I have been discussing up to this point to the cultural perspective that emerges in those moments and groups which emphasize the emotion-estrangement dichotomy. Here, women's greater perceived capacity to experience emotion is seen as an index of their spiritual superiority and of the lesser degree of their alienation. The ideological placement of women in the domestic sphere in 19th-century Europe and America and the association of men with what was experienced as the disenchantment of the world in the industrial age was accompanied by the notion that women's more sensitive emotional nature was the family's treasure and resource (as, for example, in Parrsons and Bales 1955). Here the concept of nature takes on its Rousseauian sense and, as a consequence, women are evaluated relatively more positively by virtue of their emotionality.¹⁶

Contemporary feminism has, in particular, developed this theme, which had remained a relatively minor one in the culture at large. Women's emotionality is celebrated, either explicitly (for example, Chodorow 1978) or implicitly (for example, Smith-Rosenberg 1975), as a sign of women's closer approximation to the natural state of human beings, which is to be in relationship with others; it is these relationships—this interpersonal *engagement*—that produces affect. Men's diminished emotionality has been seen as the result of a socially learned or produced *suppression* or excision of those natural emotional capacities which women evidence. Here, the natural is not the biological so much as it is the positive or correct state of affairs. Women's greater emotional expressiveness is seen as natural, which is to say as both effortless and good, but not as a natural *fact*; the gender differences in emotionality are seen in much feminist discourse as constructed by virtue of women's and men's experiences in a particular social world.

Emotion as Value

The double edged character of the Western cultural conceptualization of emotion is nowhere more evident than in the manner in which the emotions are related to value, morality, and ethics. While emotions are fundamentally devalued themselves—as irrational, physical, unintentional, weak, biased, and fe-

male—they are valued by some individuals and in certain contexts as “good” aspects of the person. Associated, on the one hand, with all that is amoral—our physical, animal heritage, the unconsidered and uncontrolled, the irresponsible—the occurrence of emotion may ensure immoral behavior or even relieve the person of moral responsibility. On the other hand, emotions are also sometimes considered to be an expression of personal values. Emotion is, in the latter case, conceptualized as the means by which value is apprehended or perceived in the world; we experience emotion when we focus on the values involved in a particular situation. Here morality requires emotion because affect provides the motivation for taking particular moral positions toward events. The dominant view of the relation between morality and emotion, however, is one in which the two operate in radically different, even opposed, terms.

To understand the cultural contradiction between these two senses of emotion (as constituting value and as its antithesis), it is also necessary to recognize that the concept of morality is, like emotion, culturally constructed. The concept of morality depends, for instance, on the concept of the person and of knowledge dominant in a particular society insofar as we begin with the premise that morality is a particular way of being human in the world. One cultural concept of the Good which contrasts with what we more specifically mean by morality in the West is evident in M. Rosaldo’s description of the Philippine Ilongot view of why people behave in the way they do; “when Ilongots see their interests as potentially opposed, issues of forcefulness and strength . . . and not of guilt, or personal desire and restraint, are likely to determine moral choice” (1983:141). Morality is, for the Ilongot, not a nexus of decisions for the individual, nor a struggle between the antisocial individual impulse and the wider social good, but the achievement of the valued state of affairs (for example, the elimination of violence or selfishness between kin), “by fiat, dominance, or gift exchange . . . for cooperation to proceed, no more is necessary than the correction of imbalances by which men are divided” (1983:41).

What appears to be at the root of the paradox of Euroamerican attitudes toward the morality of emotion is the tradition of positivism. By splitting the world into objective and subjective domains and into matters of fact and matters of value, and by associating detachment and cognition with the former, passionate involvement with and commitment to a way of viewing and acting in the world is outcast. Science, which defines itself as seeking all knowledge that is important, is declared value-free (or at least ideally value-free). With the erosion of faith in positivism in the more recent history of social science and of this culture generally, there has been a concern to reincorporate the concept of morality into the pursuit of knowledge and into social science. The new positions attempt to relate science to value by legitimating criticism and commitment in the pursuit of an understanding of social life or rather by making the goal of knowing the world subserve the goal of eliminating injustice in it (Geuss 1981).

These views of knowledge as impregnated with value and interests, however, continue to segregate emotion from the process of critical understanding. This view is represented in a recent collection of articles on the relationship be-

tween morality and social science. The introduction to that volume states that all the included authors agree, in their critique of positivism, “that social science has an intrinsic connection with the moral and political life of a society,” that this recognition makes us “better able to *cognitively* understand the reality that we confront” and that there is an “obligation of the social scientist to view reality as *dispassionately* as possible” (Bellah, Haan, Rabinow, and Sullivan 1983:16; emphasis added).¹⁷ The continued emphasis on the incompatibility of moral awareness and emotion would appear to occur because the concepts of emotion and morality remain themselves unexamined. Given the dominant cultural meanings assigned to these terms, there are too many reasons for the positivist to save the technical rationality and resultant legitimacy of their enterprise from the critique of either morality or emotion and for the post-positivists to rescue morality from the subjectivity, irrationality, and chaos implied by emotion, given the positive valuation of the former concept and the negative view of the latter set.

The contradiction between this dominant perspective on emotion as antithetical to morality and that perspective in which emotion and value are intertwined can be viewed as the result of subcultural variation within the Euroamerican tradition in understandings of the concept of morality, variation which has been identified by Gilligan (1982) as gender related. Specifically, Gilligan argues that morality is conceptualized in two different ways by men and women, and that the former, male definition has dominated in social scientific and other official discourse within our culture. The predominantly male definition of morality focuses on the competing rights of individuals, on fairness, and on the application of an abstract moral code to particular cases of ethical choice. The conception of morality which Gilligan found to dominate in American women’s thinking centers around notions of the conflicting responsibilities facing the moral decision maker and the primacy of the necessity of caring for others as the most adequate guide for behavior; this female view of morality puts relationships rather than individuals and concrete contexts or relationships rather than abstract codes at the center of moral dilemmas. Gilligan exemplifies this contrast between the two versions of morality by reference to “the biblical Abraham, who prepared to sacrifice the life of his son in order to demonstrate the integrity and supremacy of his faith,” thereby “sacrific[ing] people to truth.” Abraham stands “in implicit contrast to the woman who comes before Solomon and verifies her motherhood by relinquishing truth in order to save the life of her child” (1982:104–105). The male morality of “rights and noninterference” may seem to women a “potential justification of indifference and unconcern,” while the females’ morality of caring and responsibility may seem to men “inconclusive and diffuse, given its insistent contextual relativism” (1982:22).

If the masculine definition of morality is used implicitly in the dominant ideology of self and affect, emotions will be seen as having little to do with the mature exercise of the ethical sense. Moral development becomes cognitive development and value an abstract code or set of rules. And in particular, given the individualistic view of self in males that goes hand in hand with this morality, emotions are events which happen exclusively inside the individual and are con-

quered there. The morality which characterizes American women, on the other hand, has much to say to emotional development, as it is in the ability to experience the emotions necessary to caring for others, which include compassion most especially, that moral development proceeds. Given the relational view of the self that more commonly characterizes women according to Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), and others, we might expect that emotions will be experienced more directly by them as an aspect of relationships rather than of individuals.

Morality, in sum, bears a contradictory relationship to the concept of emotion. This contradiction can be illuminated by reference both to the underlying and different contrast sets (cognition and estrangement) in which emotion participates and by reference to subcultural variation in the conceptualization of morality, particularly as it is evidenced in the moral views of American men and women. To speak of the relationship between emotion and value, then, it has been necessary to deconstruct these various and shifting senses in which the two concepts can and have been used in Euroamerican discourse. In the long run, this allows for the claim that emotions ought to be seen as central to morality and culture because the particular form of rationality and critique that they represent is central to the regulation and preservation of social relationships. To make this claim is to draw on the traditions in which morality is primarily nurturance rather than rights and in which emotion is the necessary result of relationship with others more than the unfortunate breakdown of individual cognitive functioning.

In explicating the cultural assumptions embedded in the concept of emotion, this paper has attempted to reclaim the language of emotion from the unexamined terms of the dichotomies—with thought and estrangement—in which it has participated. It is also intended to undermine, to some extent, the ideological functions the concept of emotion has served. And finally, by demonstrating the nature and extent of the Western cultural construction of emotion, it is possible to contrast these conceptions to the ethnopsychological premises upon which the emotional lives of people of other cultures are based, premises which we might now only gingerly term “emotional.”

Notes

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¹It is somewhat misleading to speak of a two thousand-year-long discourse on “emotion” when in fact that latter category bears only a family resemblance to the variety of related Greek, Latin, and other concepts which have occupied Western thinkers. Each historical period has also seen the use of a set of related terms to talk about the domain—such as the contemporary set of “feeling,” “emotion,” “affect,” and (somewhat archaic) “passion”—each of which were used in varying and ambiguous ways in virtually all periods.

²There are other subtle differences in historical and cultural source and connotation between emotion, affect, feeling, and passion. Feeling, for example, tends to be used to talk

about internal body sensations more exclusively than do the other terms. Passion may be used synonymously with emotion but tends to more often refer specifically to love or sexual desire, or to enthusiasms, while affect is now rarely heard outside of academic discourse.

³See, for example, the portrayal of persons in the popular theories of Goffman (1959).

⁴In this regard, there may be a subtle difference in everyday talk between the uses to which the term emotional and more specific emotion terms are put. When, for example, someone is said to be angry, the sensibility of that feeling is, to some degree, taken for granted. In other words, while anger may be warranted in some cases, emotionality (the personality trait) and emotional behavior (or generic emotion) are not.

⁵The roots of the links between emotion and chaos, and the negative evaluation of both, Hillman also notes, are quite ancient ones in Western thought. The Greeks believed that “order, goodness, reason and the upper regions of the body belonged together” (1960:209) and that stability and the absence of motion were desirable states; “the Church Fathers perfected the model by identifying it with God, Whose perfection would not allow the attributes of disorder, change, corporeality, evil and the irrational” (1960:209).

⁶This frequent critique of conceptualizations of emotion is itself a reflection of the intense Western concern with personal (rather than social) responsibility for action as well as mental disorder (see White and Marsella 1982).

⁷As Toulmin (1979) and others have pointed out, there are two traditions of thought in the West as to the nature of cognition, one of which identifies it as a brain, or physical function, and the other of which locates it in the mind, which is defined as a nonphysical entity.

⁸This perspective on the relationship between the emotional-qua-the-physical and the mental has a clear parallel with the culturally common view of the relationship between disease and mental processes. The idea that sickness is rooted squarely in the body, and is influenced by the mental only secondarily and less genuinely, is evident in the suspicion Americans hold for those who claim to be sick when no physical cause can be found. The distinction between disease (as underlying physical process) and illness (as the socially elaborated response to and cognitive experience of disease), which is common in the medical anthropological literature, draws on the same belief in “a stable and universal core of bio-physical realities” (Comaroff 1983).

⁹Sentiment is defined in the dictionary as “an attitude, thought, or judgment prompted by feeling; refined feeling, delicate sensibility, emotional idealism, a romantic or nostalgic feeling verging on sentimentality.” Although it is not a term used in everyday talk, these anthropological uses intend to draw on the notion that it is only thought (including “thought . . . prompted by feeling”) that bears the impress of culture, while pure, pre-conscious emotion does not.

¹⁰In Beck’s view, certain types of premises, representations, or silent assumptions held by individuals intervene between an event and depressive feelings, and create the possibility for the emotion. Here cognition is the “creative subject” and affect the “resource” in Strathern’s terms. Hochschild, in examining the social organization of emotional expression among airline stewardesses, critiques the process whereby the women’s natural feelings are warped by the social pressures exerted by their bosses. Again, natural emotion is molded by the active pressure exerted by social expectations.

¹¹I am thankful to Jane Collins for this latter observation.

¹²Freeman also talks about emotions in the positive sense which nature can have in his mention of the love which Samoans feel for each other, but this is certainly a minor theme.

¹³See Sabini and Silver (1982) for a wonderful exposition of the various ways (they find eight) in which the term "subjective" is commonly used in everyday discourse. If, as Sabini and Silver point out, "notions of subjectivity are individually harmless, but dangerous in a mob" (1982:183), it is important to distinguish these distinct senses for our purposes.

¹⁴This cultural belief is somewhat mitigated by the fact that other cultural ideas exist which outline the ways in which it is possible to know what someone else is feeling without the other telling us, or even wishing us to know. Faces, body gestures, and tone of voice are all seen as relatively involuntary indices, or "leakages," of the person's internal states.

¹⁵American beliefs about the appropriateness of particular emotions to particular situations obviously also enter into the assessments of these public figures. Tears (although not wailing) are expected at funerals but not in political contexts. But a man who did not cry at a funeral, or a woman who cried because her husband was insulted in a political campaign, would be unremarkable because culturally proper in their emotional behavior.

¹⁶Rousseau himself, however, showed a remarkable inability to revise his orthodox understanding of women (as necessarily subordinate and inferior to men) in order to draw it into keeping with his radical reconceptualization of the relations between nature and society (Okin 1979).

¹⁷While Bellah et al. would appear to allow that it is not possible to eliminate emotion from all scientific deliberations by their proviso that we expunge only so much as is "possible," it is clear that they view the most minimal emotion as the ideal in attempts to understand reality.

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