

# Conscious emotional feelings — beyond the four taboos

## An introductory comment

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“Diana threw Stephen a quick, apologetic glance and ran into the house. She moved with the perfect, unconscious grace that had always touched him, and he felt a wave of tenderness, allied to his former passionate love; perhaps its ghost.”

Patrick O'Brian. *The Surgeon's Mate*. (1980)

(London: W.W. Norton), p.39.

The publication of *Consciousness and Emotion* may signal a new era in studying two of the most important facts of human existence: That we are conscious, and that our lives are shaped and defined by emotions. Those twin realities may seem obvious to most people, as indeed they were to thinkers from the earliest times all over the world. Ancient texts are filled with descriptions of conscious emotions. The first report of a major panic attack may be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, written in Sumeria about three millenia ago, after the hero's closest friend Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh in distress begins to search for the secret of immortality. Homer's Iliad is a cycle of battle stories occasioned by sexual desire, love and yearning for Helen and Briseis, of anger and pride and the bloodshed that followed. Two and half millenia ago the Hindu Upanishads and Buddhist sutras summarized extended meditations on desire and anger, and how to become free of those conscious feelings. Mayan civilization at its height would make daily sacrifices of young children, in a bloody ritual designed to stave off the conscious fear that the sun would not rise the following day. Chinese imperial culture five millenia ago was preoccupied with reverence and

guilt toward ancestors. Sadness, frustration, desire, envy, love, were discussed in depth long before the invention of writing. Like today's headlines, ancient narratives and myths everywhere are filled with conscious emotional crises.

Yet curiously enough these daily reports about conscious emotions are rarely studied in science, though the methods for doing so have steadily improved (e.g. Lazarus, 1991; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998; Singer, 1993). Even recent research appears to evade conscious aspects of emotion. Yet conscious emotions are to some extent obvious, and may be part of folk knowledge in all cultures. In particular, there is a striking set of common sayings about conscious waves, surges and pangs of conscious feeling. For example, "a pang of guilt," "a wave of tenderness" (as in the epigraph), "a surge of rage," "a jolt of fear." Sometimes such states of conscious feeling can be long-lasting, as in popular songs that speak of the conscious "heartache" of love lost. According to folk linguistic convention we can *feel* all the emotions, from fear to love to rage, in a focally conscious way in the inner body.

This is not the place to explore why scientific studies of emotion have suffered from a sort of taboo, and why consciousness has been viewed as "nothing but the soul of theology" since the beginning of the 20th century (Baars, 1986, 1988, 1997; Watson, 1920). Suffice it to say that these most central human topics have been exiled from science until a few decades ago, for good reasons or bad, and that the combined topic of *conscious emotion* has therefore been under a double ban. The very heart of human existence has been untouchable for decades, and academic departments have taught generations of impressionable college students that their daily inner dramas of love and fear, envy and joy, offer nothing of scientific interest. The resulting alienation in the lives of students is difficult to measure, but it must be substantial.

But the damage has not been limited to education. Avoiding consciousness and emotion has allowed a great gap to emerge between the sciences and humanities, the famous Two Cultures of the British novelist C. P. Snow. It has, in effect, opened a chasm in our intellectual culture, with unfathomable consequences. The most sensitive sources of information about emotion come from the arts, literature, and the creation of meaning in myth and religion. Compared to the psychological novel, for instance, all of our scientific facts and theories are crude and clunky. The twentieth century was the century of behaviorism, but it was also the century of Joyce, Dos Passos and Sartre, novelists devoted to understanding the stream of consciousness. The epigraph of this paper is just one small gem that can be instantly recognized by almost anyone. Thousands of others can be found in the narratives of all cultures, an

embarrassment of riches that the sciences have not begun to touch. Thus the first two scientific taboos — against emotion and consciousness — have led directly to massive blind spots about the sources of human significance that pervade the arts and literature.

There is a fourth taboo that flows from the first three; that is the continuing exclusion of psychodynamic thought, probably the single richest gold mine of hypotheses about the emotions. Psychodynamic thinking, going back to Freud, suffers from many defects. Many of the clinical observations on which it is based were long hidden from careful scientific study, confined to the confessional privacy of the couch. The language of psychoanalysts often seems directed to a privileged in-group. Inferences about childhood and unconscious processes seem unsupported by evidence. Some ideas seem simply odd. Yet psychodynamics is still the most important source of ideas about emotional self-regulation and defenses, the exclusion of distressing emotion from consciousness, and conflicts between different emotions. Those are not small issues.

What seems odd is that few academic scientists are inclined to simply separate the wheat from the chaff in Freudian thought. Most scientific pioneers have questionable ideas. Newton thought his greatest work was a commentary on the Book of Job. Einstein always rejected quantum theory. Darwin believed in Lamarckian evolution at one point, in which giraffes were thought to grow taller over the generations by stretching out their necks to nibble on the highest leaves on the trees. The ideas of pioneers always need to be tested and refashioned by later generations. Yet the common reaction even today to Freud and his followers is not to toss out the bad and keep the good, but rather to reject clinical psychodynamics wholesale. That attitude has all the earmarks of another taboo. Fortunately we are beginning to see some solid empirical results that make sense of what has always seemed so odd to academic scientists (e.g. Luborsky & Crits-Christoff, 1998; Seligman, 1998).

Thus we have been handicapped by four reigning taboos, subjects on which scientific skepticism seems disproportionate: against consciousness, emotion, the humanities as a source of ideas, and psychodynamics. Is it necessary to say that taboos are the very antithesis of science?

I hasten to point out that the last few decades have seen the seeds of change. New approaches have come from social and cognitive psychology, psychiatry and clinical psychology, the brain sciences, ethology and comparative neurobiology. Scientific headline journals have regularly published findings about the brain basis of consciousness in the last several years (Baars & Newman, *in press*). Excellent work has been done on emotion and consciousness. Sterile controversies that

only a few years ago seemed destined to go on and on, are now gone. Questions that could not be imagined before now define the frontier.

Yet some fundamental questions are not yet back in fashion: What is the nature of conscious emotional feelings? What brain events subserve them? How do conscious aspects of emotion relate to unconscious aspects? When do emotions conflict, and how are conflicts resolved? Nor have we begun to identify what is of value in the humanities and psychodynamic thought. The massive taboos of the twentieth century are not quite gone — and we have not yet begun to ask why human beings, even scientists, develop prohibitions and taboos so often. When we make progress on those questions we will indeed be back to the human fundamentals.

*Consciousness and Emotion* is therefore a much-needed forum for rediscovering human nature, exploring it, and gaining the insights we need so badly in an emotionally confusing world.

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