

Emotions in Contexts: Cultural Conceptions in Ancient and Medieval Societies

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Introduction

by

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About the Author

DOUGLAS CAIRNS is professor of classics in the University of Edinburgh and author of *Aidôs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (1993), *Bacchylides: Five Epinician Odes* (2010), and *Sophocles: Antigone* (2016). His most recent edited volumes include *Distributed Cognition in Classical Antiquity* (2018, with Miranda Anderson and Mark Sprevak), *A Cultural History of the Emotions in Antiquity* (2019), *Emotions through Time: From Antiquity to Byzantium* (2022, with Martin Hinterberger, Aglae Pizzone, and Matteo Zaccarini), *Contempt, Ancient and Modern* (2023), and *In the Mind, in the Body, in the World: Emotions in Early China and Ancient Greece* (2024, with Curie Virág).

Keywords emotions, affectivity and cognition, cultural models of emotion, 4E cognition, metaphor, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, ancient Mesopotamia, medieval German

The papers in this special section derive, directly or indirectly, from a workshop on current methods and approaches in emotion research held at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz on 25–26 February 2019 in association with the tenure of a Mercator Fellowship (2018–2019) by Douglas Cairns (Edinburgh) under the aegis of the Mainz Graduiertenkolleg (GRK) 1876, *Frühe Konzepte von Mensch und Natur: Universalität, Spezifität, Tradierung* (Early Concepts of Humans and Nature: Universal, Specific, Interchanged), funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Three of our contributors (Colombetti, Hofert, and Steinert) spoke at that event. Colombetti and Steinert have since joined forces to write for this special section, which also includes papers by a further two members of the GRK who did not present at the original workshop.

Emotions and their history form an important strand of the GRK's wide focus on concepts of the human, ideas of nature, and the interaction between the two in the cultures of the ancient Near East, the Mediterranean, and Europe from 100,000 BC to the Middle Ages. It is a pleasure to note that something of that range of interests is reflected in the four papers collected here, which touch on Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and medieval German approaches to human emotions as reflections of the place of human beings in the world.

A scientific account of emotion and emotions has been a desideratum at least since Aristotle's *De anima*, where he distinguishes between the accounts of the *pathê* of the soul given by traditional natural scientists and those offered by the dialectician [1.1 403a3–b19]. A true natural scientist, in Aristotle's view, combines both approaches [*De an.* 403b7–16], focusing on both the material and the formal aspects of the *pathê*, a category that is much wider than that of emotion, even if emotions do furnish many of its best examples [403a17–18].¹ The strictly materialist approach with which Aristotle credits the variety of natural science that he rejects might perhaps be traced to the medical writers of the Hippocratic corpus, where explicit emphasis on the intentional aspects of emotion—their focus on their formal objects, eliciting conditions, and goals—is minimal [Kazantzidis 2019a; 2019b].

¹ See Rapp 2002, 2.543–545; cf. 2008, 48.

In later Greek and Roman medicine, emotions continued to be a focus of interest, as they were also in other classical medical traditions, such as the Chinese [Hsu 2023].² But as Colombetti and Steinert illustrate in this issue, medical and quasimedical approaches to emotions, conceived as afflictions that may respond to various forms of healing, are also reflected in sources and documents deriving from the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia. That emotions might constitute, in at least some of their manifestations, a problem requiring therapeutic, religious, ritual, or magical interventions helps illustrate the point that emotions might be the focus of both methods and theories that one might broadly characterize as scientific and of those that have typically been regarded as rivals or alternatives to scientific approaches. The Aristotelian corpus, indeed, illustrates that already in the fourth century BC emotions might be the subject matter of a range of sciences, including political science and that branch of it that Aristotle calls ethics. The fullest account of emotion in that corpus, however, is in the *Rhetoric*. Here his treatment is informed not only by the scientific psychology of the *De anima* and not only by the approaches of his biological works [Morel 2016] but also by the insights into motivation, character, and sociopolitical interaction of the *Ethics* and *Politics*.³ The *Rhetoric* is designed to meet the pragmatic requirements of public speakers and litigants and inaugurates a tradition in which the performance and elicitation of emotion is central to rhetorical theory.

But in the treatment of emotions in its second book, it also exhibits a remarkable focus on the embeddedness of emotion in the dynamics of social interaction, one that anticipates the classic sociology of Goffman and his followers [Goffman 1967: cf. Origi 2018]. Time and again in that treatment, the relevant affective states emerge from the interplay between the individual's own role in social interaction and that of others, both as interactants and as members of a relevant reference group. Typically, self-image is brought into relation not just with what others think of us but with what *we think* others think of us, often in the light of what we think of them. In that way, our emotions stand in a dynamic interrelation with others' readings of our emotions and with our reading of their emotions [Gallagher 2020, 69–184]. This is an understanding of emotions as socially embedded forms of social cognition,

² See Kazantzidis 2024 for a comparison of Greek and Chinese approaches.

³ For an account that gives all these aspects their due, see Rapp 2002, 2.558–570: cf. 2008, 50–57. Others, such as Fortenbaugh [2002], Leighton [1982], Nussbaum [1994; 2001], Konstan [2006], and Renaut [2022], focus overwhelming on the evaluative aspects.

suggesting a thoroughly Goffmanesque (and in some ways Bourdieusian) picture in which self-presentation can take place only in a milieu in which other selves are presented, with all the implicit negotiations between self and other that this entails.

Thus, while scientific approaches to emotion loom large in the history of science and the history of emotions, emotions are the stuff of many more sciences than medicine or psychology, and these sciences too have a history with ancient roots. The history of emotion is also the history of a wide range of at least broadly scientific approaches to emotion [see, e.g., [Boddice 2018](#)]. Much of the work in the field of emotion history to date has concentrated on European history, e.g., in the six-volume Bloomsbury series, *A Cultural History of the Emotions* [cf. [Broomhall and Lynch 2019](#)], but there has recently been a growth also in studies of ancient Near Eastern culture [[Sonik and Steinert 2023](#)], classical Chinese thought [[Virág 2017](#)], and classical Indian thought [[Bilimoria and Wenta 2015](#); [Heim, Ram-Prasad, and Tzohar 2021](#)]. Not all of our four papers in this section deal with emotion theory as an aspect of the history of medicine or science, but all deal with phenomena that affective science has focused on, both in the periods and cultures in question and at other times in other cultures, and these are phenomena that are inevitably permeated and informed by folk and scientific theories of emotion as ways of understanding and interacting with the world. Contributors had a free hand in reflecting their own interests and the methodologies of their disciplines, but a number of cross-cutting themes do emerge, especially with regard to entanglements between humans and their environments, between the body and the world, between humans and animals, between concepts and ideas pursued in textual sources and those embedded in relations between agents and objects, and between the phenomenology of emotion and the concepts—especially the metaphorical concepts—that human beings use to think and talk about it.

In “Material Affective Engagements: Examples from Ancient Mesopotamia”, Giovanna Colombetti and Ulrike Steinert use first-millennium BC Mesopotamian amulets—an especially powerful category of object—to explore how notions of affectivity and cognition as embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended illuminate the ways in which humans, ancient and modern, use objects and other features of the world as aspects of their cognitive/affective experience, implicating these objects and artifacts in their ways of thinking and feeling and thereby conditioning the experiences of thinking and feeling themselves. The amulets and associated magical, ritual, and religious practices that the authors discuss are involved in the management

not only of affective states as such (one's own and those of others) but also of the emotional aspects of a range of life events and conditions (including those, such as childbirth, fertility, and impotence, that might now be the focus of medical treatment). How the properties of these objects (e.g., their color, their hardness) are—metonymically, metaphorically, or symbolically—associated with the management of particular affective experiences indicates their role in the conceptualization of those experiences themselves.

In her paper, “Exploring the Expression of Sexual Desire in Ancient Egyptian through a Selection of Primary Sources: An Approach from the Emotional Perspective”, Judit Garzón Rodríguez focuses especially on textual sources from the New Kingdom period (ca 1550–ca 1069 BC) to investigate in particular the role of ancient Egyptian “love songs” in representing and expressing the affective aspects of sexual desire. These sources represent just one set of pieces in a much larger jigsaw, and Garzón Rodríguez touches in passing also on the wider background of concepts and sources in which her specific investigation might be set, whether that be the significance of sexuality in Egyptian cosmogony and religion, the use of visual and material evidence for ancient Egyptian sexuality, or even the scientific and medical implications (in terms of contraception) if sex is going to be pursued for recreational rather than procreative purposes.

Where the texts that Garzón Rodríguez discusses stand out is in their vivid representation—and indeed, in at least some cases, expression—of sexual desire as an affectively powerful subjective experience. Conditioned as these texts inevitably are by prevalent generic and social conventions, still they display a pronounced sensuality in which a whole range of sensory modalities (especially sight, smell, and touch) are triggered by the vivid representation of affordances—typically physical but regularly enhanced by other factors such as clothing—for action and interaction in ways that appear to assume norms of mutual satisfaction for both parties, male and female. A notable feature of the phenomenology of desire that these texts construct is the frequent use of metaphor, especially floral and vegetal.

Metaphor is central also to Chiara Ferella's contribution, “Cosmic Emotions; or, Why Is the Universe Joyful according to Plato's *Timaeus* and Empedocles?” Both Plato and Empedocles offer particular inflections of the human capacity for social cognition and other-understanding and especially of the tendency of our hyperactive capacities for agency detection to map features of human (and animal) agency onto nonhuman (and nonanimal) aspects of the environment. The basic mechanism is that of personification, the ontological metaphor that maps features of the person, the human agent, onto

entities that are not themselves agent-like. Traditional anthropomorphism is one way of doing this, creating hypothetical divine agents on the model of human agency and thereby, among other things, accounting for various forms of causation not involving agency.

But from the earliest stages Greek poetic and philosophical thought projected human experience—including mindedness and affectivity—onto nature in a wide range of other ways (e.g., in the sky’s sexual desire for the earth in Aeschylus’ *Danaids* [Radt 1985, fr. 44], or the representation of Aphrodite as an elemental force that permeates the natural world in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, 1268–1282). The presentation of the joyful universe in Empedocles and Plato, as interpreted by Ferella, departs very substantially from traditional anthropomorphism; the cosmos of the *Timaeus*, in particular, exhibits a perfect form of rationality to which embodied human beings can only aspire to approximate. Yet, in both cases, transformed notions of a divine universe are filtered through earlier notions of divinity whose features derive ultimately from human experience.

Of the two, it is perhaps Empedocles’ cosmos that is more genuinely affectively charged: not only is it governed by the interaction of Love and Strife, but its “happiness” or “joy” (*gêthosynê*) [DK 31B27, B28] is more clearly a subjective affective state—more like the “happiness” studied in contemporary affective science—than the more objective condition of *eudaimonia* that characterizes the souls and the world-soul of the *Timaeus* [34b, 42b, 90c], even if the latter does, inevitably, also have connotations of subjectivity. Paradoxically, perhaps, the application of salient aspects of human experience to the nature of the cosmos in both cases sets up a model in which human experience become only one manifestation of a wider set of universal principles, and much that is specifically human in the original source domain is left behind. In these two sources, the historical investigation of human affectivity intersects with the history of the sciences—astronomy, biology, cosmology, geometry, and mathematics—in striking and unexpected ways.

The fourth paper, by Sandra Hofert on “Animals and Emotions in German Medieval Literature: The Various Functions of Bestial Imagery in the Staging of Emotions”, is similarly concerned with metaphor, specifically the use of animals and their behavior as a source domain for thinking and talking about human emotion. As in many other earlier and later cultures, medieval German literature represents emotions as beasts to be tamed or as products of the bestial elements of human nature, employing metaphors of self-division and conflict between reason and passion. At the same time, there is a feedback loop in which animals, more or less anthropomorphized

in terms of their propensity to characteristically human emotions, serve as allegorical models for human conduct, sometimes as characters in narrative interaction with human beings. Again, there is a connection with the history of science insofar as medieval versions of ancient theories of the four humors (themselves fundamentally metaphorical in conception) and physiognomics play a role in the conceptualization of the human and animal emotions under consideration.

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