
Over the last couple of decades there has occurred a discernible renewal of interest across a variety of disciplines in the topic of emotion. Various widely read works such as Descartes' Error, by neurologist Antonio Damasio, and Emotional Intelligence, by psychologist Daniel Goleman, have, in their own ways, challenged conventional assumptions about emotion and, in particular, its relation to cognition. The classically modern view – the ‘error’ that Damasio imputes to Descartes – construed cognitive states and processes as essentially affectless and, conversely, treated emotions as brute and unintelligent feelings.
That is, cognition and affect had been dichotomised in terms of the conventional mind-body distinction, and the idea of cool-headed affectless thought had shaded into the exalted, often exclusive, epistemic value that modern Western culture had attributed to the natural sciences conceived as models of dispassionate objectivity. Thought of as located outside of cognition in this way, emotions could only be regarded as having the negative cognitive status of being disrupters to cool-headed thinking. Against this, however, Damasio and Goleman have contributed to a broad coalition of revisionist views which Fiumara describes as ‘extending from the domain of psychoanalysis to the neurosciences [which] seems to converge in the belief that affects and intelligence may function as a synergy’ (p. 80).

In studying individuals with brain injuries that had resulted in affective but, apparently, not ‘cognitive’ malfunction, Damasio found that the ability to perform normally on clinical tests of cognitive functioning could coexist with the hopeless performance of everyday life. The lives of these people suggested to him the idea of an impairment of a type of practical intelligence in which affective states were crucial for the capacity to judge or evaluate situations in ways that reflected their pertinence for those agents’ lives. Fiumara’s interpretation on the ‘synergy’ between affects and cognition builds on these sorts of revisionist approaches but takes them to more radical conclusions. For Fiumara, these sorts of studies of the relation of emotions to cognition must ultimately rebound on the deep underlying epistemological assumptions presupposed by modern culture and, indeed, presupposed by many of these revisionary studies of the emotions themselves. Drawing on a combination of psychoanalysis and the types of anti-representationalist epistemological approaches found especially in contemporary feminist philosophy, Fiumara is suspicious of the traditional paradigm of a ‘cool-headed’ affectless reason, not just in terms of its narrowness, but in terms of the repressed affective states she discerns within it. Instead she suggests turning a psychoanalytically attuned ear to Western epistemic culture, listening within its expressions for the possible affective orientations and processes implicit, and yet repressed, within them. Thus, as she says in the introduction, the book is an ‘attempt to explore the affective components of apparently non-affective human enterprises’ (p. 2).

This aspect of her project leads her to counter traditional epistemologically centred philosophy with a stance she calls ‘epistemophilic’. If affects are the ‘ways of feeling our own modes of being alive’ (p. 56) and are implicated in our cognitive processes, we may ask what they reveal about those particular modes of being alive that constitute inquiry. Traditional epistemology has taken an abstract conception of reason which, she acknowledges, has particular legitimate uses, but has decontextualised it and generalised it into a conception of reason per se and, furthermore, into a type of ideal of human existence. But the cost of this type of reason is that it functions on the basis of a repression of the sorts of affective states originally motivating it, resulting in an alienation of reason from its affective resources which ‘ultimately constitutes a mutilation of our potential for thinking and relating’ (p. 22). In contrast with such epistemology, from the epistemophilic stance ‘we can increasingly strive to think of the mind’s life in terms of caring interactions and projects of self-creation’ (p. 22).

With the idea that cool-headed reason might actually be based on a ‘desire to shape and control, predict and utilise whatever objects of inquiry’ (p. 41), Fiumara’s approach joins with relatively familiar critical positions within modern philosophy, from Heidegger, say, to the type of ‘critique of instrumental reason’ of the Frankfurt school. But Fiumara’s psychoanalytic orientation allows her to get considerably more nuanced than this: we are asked, for example, to consider what passes for distance and objectivity as the possible
effects of the operation of a primitive psychic defence mechanism brought to bear to protect the organism against various negative affects. The cool-headed reason aspired to might thus really be the manifestation of a type of pathological ‘indifference’, a state of mind prevalent in contemporary life that is ‘more dangerous than any other psychic menace, in that it functions as an almost irresistible seduction – it is painless, costless, invisible, and increasingly effective against any suffering’ (p. 141). From this perspective the agent of the idealised rationality might be seen to be impaired in ways analogous to Damasio’s brain-impaired patients, unable to mobilise and respond appropriately to affects and hence unable to articulate an evaluative orientation to the world.

Fiumara’s type of critical orientation towards the enlightenment’s rationalist hypostatisation of disembodied and affectless reason, together with its focus on the affective dimension of human life and the idea of individual self-constitution recalls certain types of early nineteenth-century romantic forms of cultural criticism. As with Fichte’s pre-figuration of romanticism, Fiumara has extended the Kantian approach of charting the necessary conditions of human knowledge and thought into the realm of the immediacy of embodied feeling. Knowledge, then, is regarded as the end-point of a process of the symbolic articulation of such initial affective states, rather than primarily the ‘representation’ of some objectively existing ‘state of affairs’. As within much romantic thought, Fiumara focuses on the threat to particularity and self-awareness by the levelling nature of the enlightenment goals of objective and universal representation. As with many of the romantics too, Fiumara’s intellectual interest in affects is tied to a critical reflection (in her case, a psychoanalytically shaped one) on modern culture and society. It seems that for her there is something about the deteriorating nature of our affective lives that gives an urgency to this type of inquiry. As affective orientation underlies our evaluative capacity, our loss of ‘affective literacy’ renders our lives centreless and prey to political manipulation. Fiumara always has an eye on the fact that there are ‘organisations, parties, or groups that relieve us from the risky management of genuine affects: they coach us into the “proper and satisfying” allocation of our emotional forces in such a way that we grossly misrepresent and falsify core affects’ (p. 141).

Hans-Georg Gadamer famously commented on the paradox facing the inquiries of those nineteenth-century romantic historians who, faced with what they thought to be the devastating effects of modern society’s dislocation from earlier organic traditions, attempted to reconstitute the link by scientific history: regarding history as a scientific object of knowledge, Gadamer contended, presupposed the sort of dislocation from it that it sought to overcome. Fiumara has analogous concerns about how to conduct an inquiry into the nature of affect. She points to the self-defeating nature of simply extending our traditional ‘objective’ modes of inquiry into the realm of our affective lives which ‘will not be saved, or enhanced, by the power of theories’ (p. 66). Rather, the salvation of our affective life will occur through ‘a transformed insight into our deeper self, and through transformed vocabularies with which to approach the predicament’ (p. 66). However, as rich and suggestive as Fiumara’s approach here is, it is unclear to me how the invention of the ‘new vocabularies’ she advocates for discussing our affective lives is meant to be kept separate from the construction of new theories of the affects. Moreover, even if they could be kept separate, it seems unclear why new and sophisticated ways of talking about the affects should be free from the type of reification that Fiumara seems concerned about with respect to theories of affect. Finally, while appreciative of Fiumara’s basic point, in reading the book I often found myself looking for some more sustained and explicit theorising of this subject domain. The down-side of her admirable ability to range across a broad domain of contemporary approaches to the subject is that quite a bit of the process of
mounting her case has been done by a type of lateral linking of diverse approaches at the expense of a sustained and conceptually unified, that is, more ‘theoretical’ development of it.

Paul Redding

Department of Philosophy
The University of Sydney
NSW, 2006
Australia
paul.redding@philosophy.usyd.edu.au