

What is an Emotion?

History & Theory



Psychology of Emotion
Day 2
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The stuff people have* to talk about before they do science.

*but not really

What we'll cover

- Some history
- Some philosophy
- Some theory
- Some debates

emotion

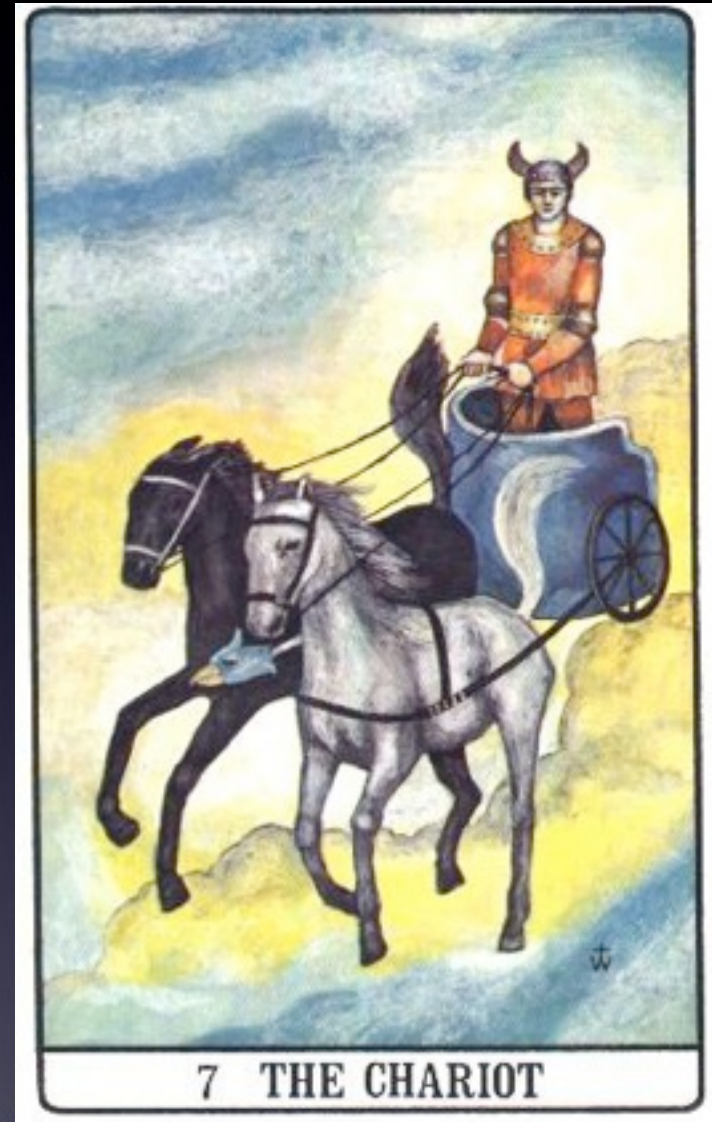
literally: “outward movement”

Emotion in the Western Tradition

- In the Western tradition, emotion was often defined and treated as the explicit opposite of reason.
- Depending on your view of emotion this is either a) philosophical 'baggage' that impedes understanding or b) deep insight into the nature of emotion

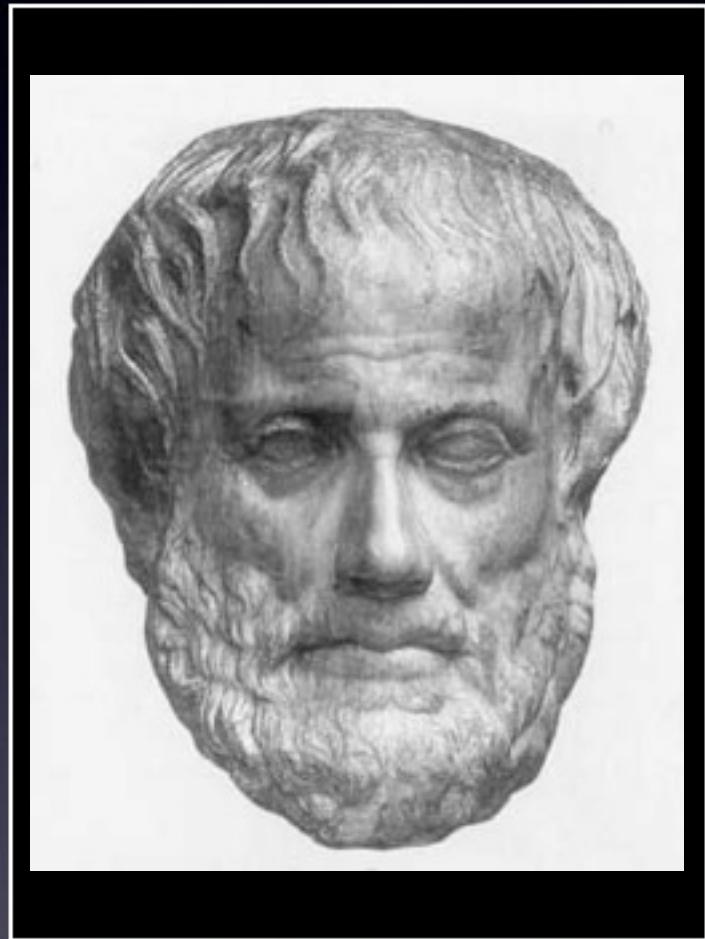
Plato's Chariot

“Two horses draw the chariot (of the personality). One of the horses is good and the other one is not. The good horse represents spirit, is noble, well formed, handsome, and tending to behave magnificently. The other horse, representing the appetites, is crooked, lumbering, ill made, stiff-necked, short-throated, with bloodshot eyes. The charioteer, whose job is to determine the direction and speed, to drive the chariot, and to coordinate the activities of both his horses is symbolic of reason.”



Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

- Still adhered to fairly non-rational view of emotion
- BUT emotions were the seat of character, not necessarily bad. *Virtue* was a product of emotional reactions.
- Called for a pragmatic understanding of the causes and consequences of emotions



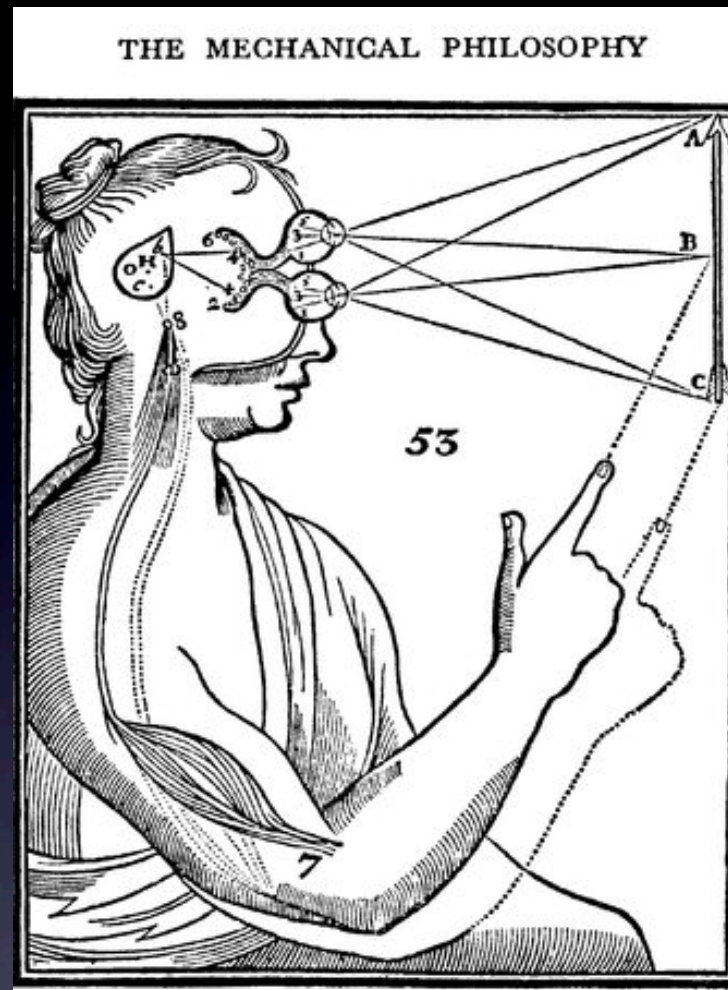
“The emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, ...such are anger, pity, fear and the like, with their opposites....Take, for instance, the emotion of anger: here we must discover...what the state of mind of angry people is, who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and on what grounds they get angry with them. It is not enough to know one or even two of these points; ...the same is true of the other emotions”

(Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book 2, Chapter 1).

Descartes' Dualism

- Descartes' description of emotions were as “animal spirits.”
- Actually a bridge between body and soul--a God-given source of motivation that allows our bodies to survive.
- Nonetheless the Cartesian legacy holds emotions to be anti-reason.

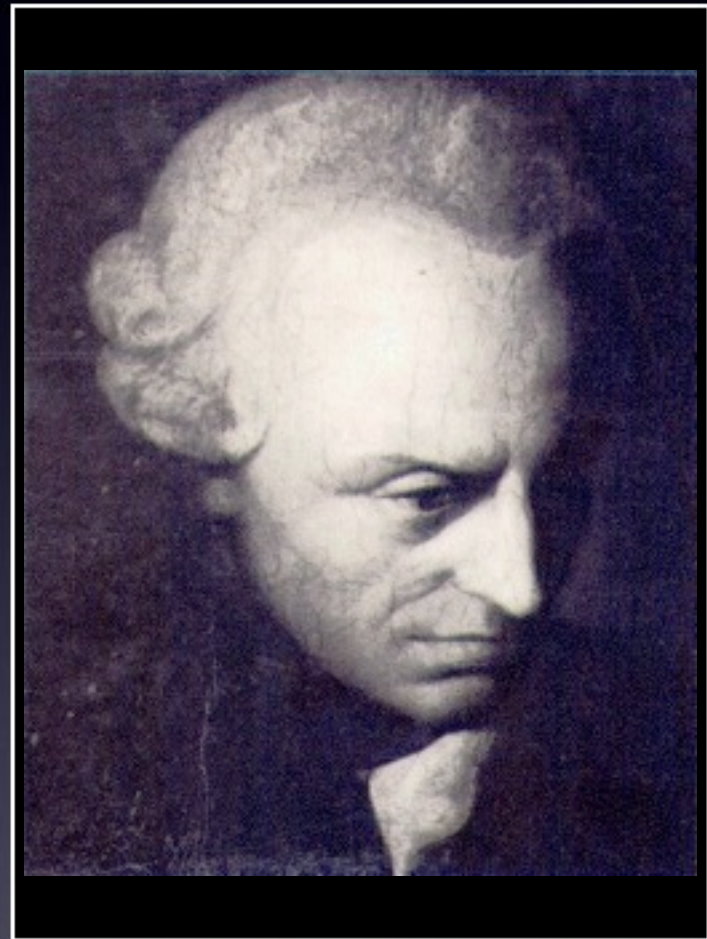




Pineal gland as the link
between mind and body

Immanuel Kant

- Interest in emotion came from his interest in human morality
- Viewed as emotions as non-moral at best and disruptive and destructive to reasoned morality at best.
- Rationalist tradition very influential in philosophy



Directly from Western Tradition...

EMOTION, n. A prostrating disease caused by a determination of the heart to the head. It is sometimes accompanied by a copious discharge of hydrated chloride of sodium from the eyes.

-Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*.



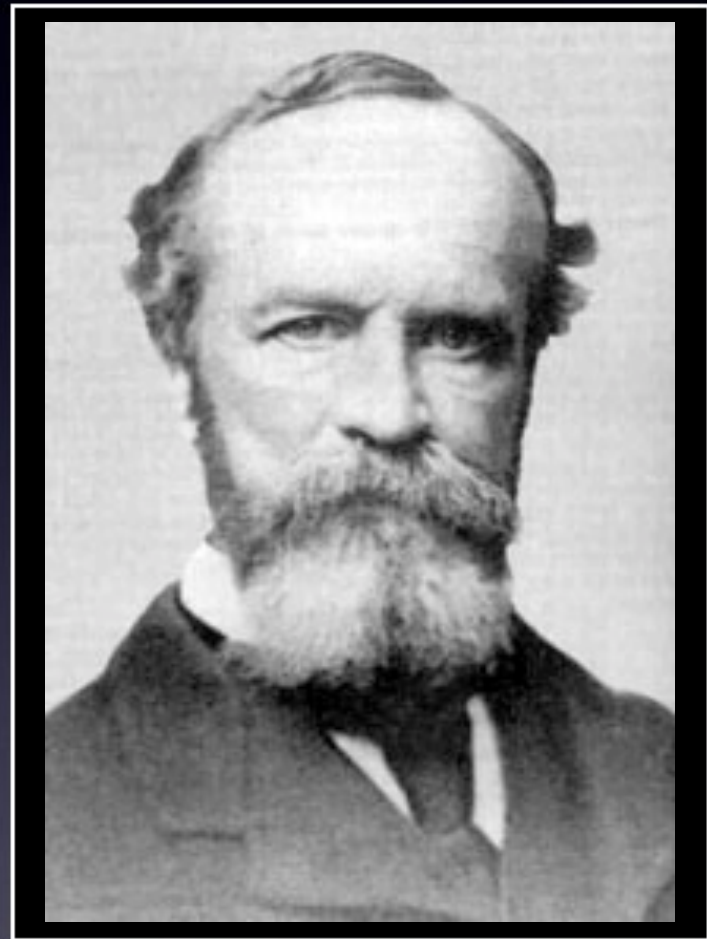


A More Scientific Treatment...

- For a budding science of psychology, a more rigorous treatment of emotion was necessary
- First major figures to give serious treatment to emotions and to provide foundation for future research.
 - Charles Darwin
 - William James
 - Walter Cannon

William James

- *Bodily/Feeling* theory of emotion (also known as James/Lange theory)
- Emotions ARE bodily states.
- Perception of external event--->bodily changes
- Bodily changes are observed by the individual as the emotion
- See a bear--run, get aroused, THEN notice the emotion

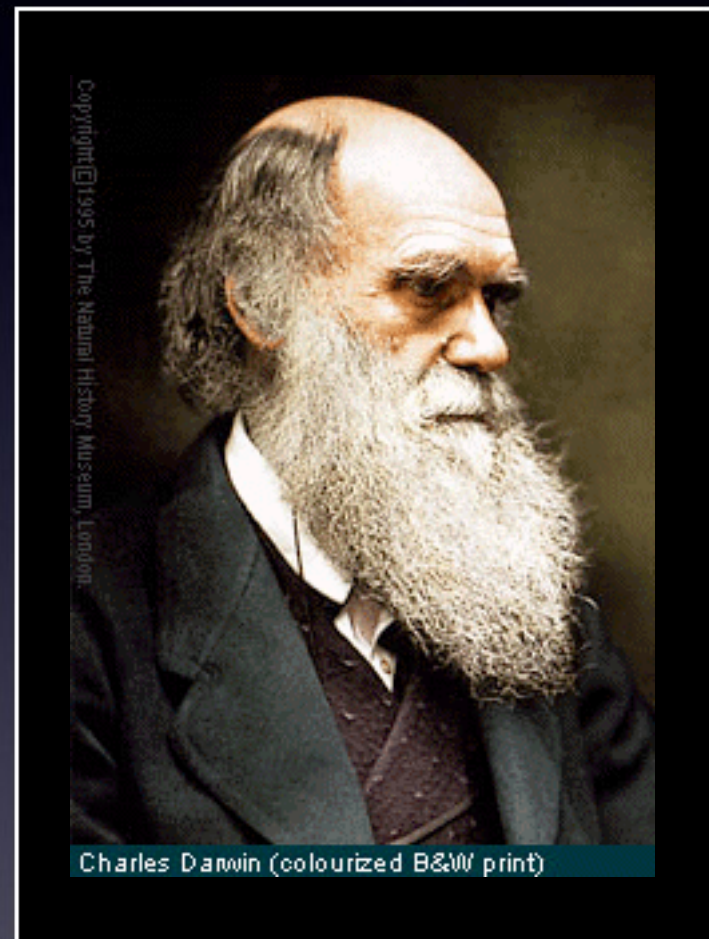


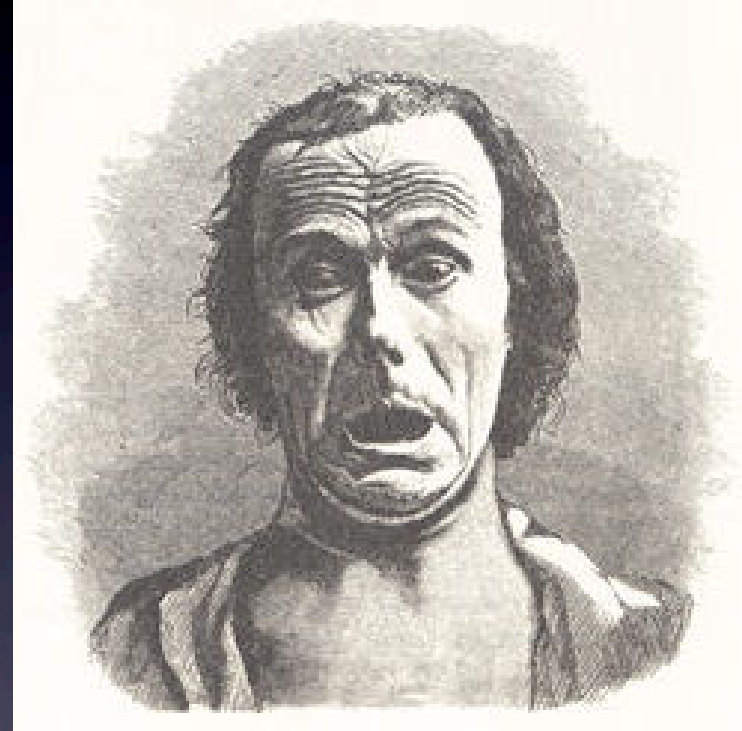
“Our natural way of thinking about ... emotions is that the mental perception of some facts excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur *is the emotion*.”

-William James, *Principles of Psychology*

Charles Darwin

- Originator of *functional* approach to emotions.
- “The expression of emotion in man and animals”
- Emotions evolved to serve a purpose
- Many emotions vestigial
- But do serve “signaling” function

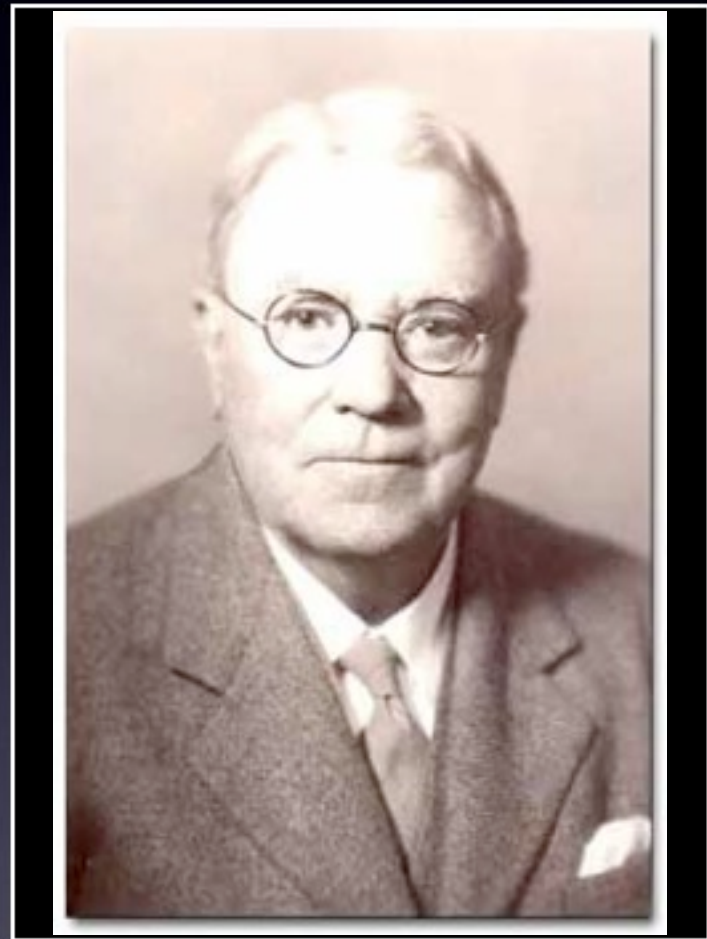




"...the young and the old of widely different races, both with man and animals, express the same state of mind by the same movements."

Walter Cannon

- Refutation of William James' bodily theory of emotions.
- Striking theory--emotions are caused THE BRAIN
- Bodily feedback not necessary for emotions.
- e.g., Quadriplegic patients?



Three influential approaches...

- *Bodily/Feeling* approach
- *Functional* approach
- *Neuroscientific* approach
- These three approaches still serve as adequate frameworks for understanding modern theories of emotion. Which we'll get to in a second...

Definitions...

- Given the budding science of emotion, the need to *define* the construct became of primary importance to theorists.
- Many definitions focus on Necessary and Sufficient conditions to label something an “emotion”
- Emotion researchers tried to take into account the various theoretical perspectives on emotion.

- “..felt tendency towards an object judged suitable, or away from an object judged unsuitable...”
- “...bidirectional processes of establishing, maintaining, and/or disrupting significant relationships between an organism and the (external or internal environment).”
- “...organized psychophysiological reactions to news about ongoing relationships with the environment.”
- “...states of readiness for engaging, or not engaging, in interaction with that environment”



“Its meaning we know so long as no
one asks us to define it”
Joseph LeDoux (1996)

Components of Emotion

- Emotions are often defined as states that have certain components:
 - Physiological Arousal
 - Expression (usually facial)
 - Subjective feeling
 - Motivation to act (action-tendency)
 - Elicitor--(internal or external “trigger”)

Counterexample Problem...

- Physiological Arousal
 - Love? Indignation?
- Expression (usually facial)
 - Easy to mask face/suppress.
- Subjective feeling
 - Unconscious emotion?
- Motivation to act
 - Sadness?
- Elicitor--(“trigger”)
 - Huge variability?

Upshot of definitional problem

- Goal to find the necessary and sufficient conditions to count as “emotion” leads to either:
 - Narrow definition that violates our intuition of what emotion is by excluding many phenomena
 - Overly broad definition that is scientifically unsatisfying.

Some distinctions

- Mood
 - More enduring state without direct object (mood)
- Personality
 - Stable individual differences across situations
- Cognition
 - Not identified by facial expressions
 - Not always physiological arousal

Why the definition problem isn't that serious

- Luckily, because there is fairly widespread agreement about many emotional phenomena, researchers can simply proceed...
- We proceed by measuring and manipulating emotions.

Monday: Manipulating and Measuring Emotion