

Feeling Our Way Towards God

Lecture 1: Should We Fear God?

Video 1: Introduction to the Talks

Video 2: Introduction to Emotions

Question: What are emotions?

In these videos I adopt the **Construction View** of Emotion

- for a great introduction to the Construction View, see:

Barrett, Lisa Feldman. 2017. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

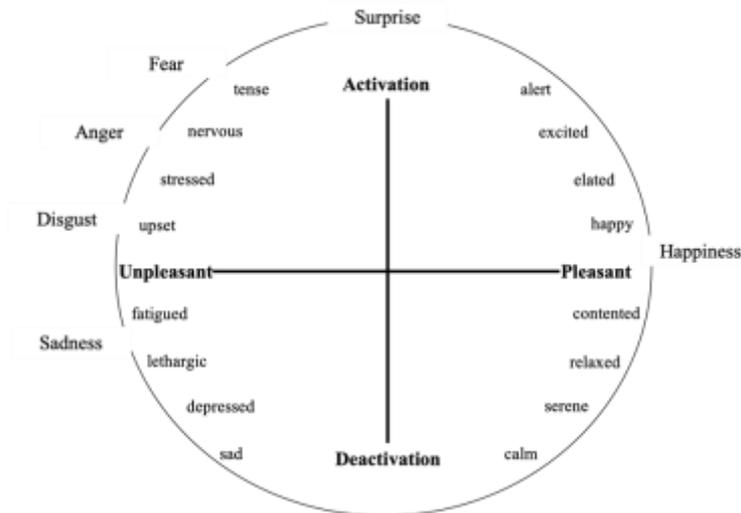
- a very accessible, practical, and fascinating book...I highly recommend!
- book available on Kindle and Audible.com
- Barrett is a star of emotion research right now in the fields of psychology and neuroscience.

Construction View of Emotion:

- Basic premise: what we call “emotions” are actually constructed out of two distinct components: affect and thoughts.

Affect:

- The feeling aspect of emotions.
 - o *practically speaking*, when we have an emotional experience, this experience comes with feelings attached
 - o Question: what does it feel like when you experience anger, fear, joy...? How would you describe these feelings?
- **VALENCE:** feelings of positivity and negativity
 - o I like to think of this in terms of feelings of **aversion** and **attraction**
 - o *practically speaking*, emotional feelings either push us away from the object of our emotion or attract us to the object of our emotion
 - think of a disgust response: people sometimes actually physically recoil from the thing that disgusts them
 - o Question: when you experience anger, fear, joy, love...do you feel yourself being pushed or pulled towards certain objects?
- **AROUSAL:** feelings of being energized and depleted
 - o *practically speaking*, emotions either energize us or relax us
 - o Question: have you noticed the difference in feeling between being afraid (energized) and bored (relaxed, but not very attractive)?
- Modelling affect
 - o for every emotion we experience, we should be able to plot the feeling (i.e., affect) component of the emotion of the following graph designed by psychologist James Russell (1980):



- *Note: Russell thinks of valence in terms of feelings of unpleasantness/unpleasantness. I prefer to think of valence in terms of aversion/attraction.*
- Try to map an emotion you've recently had on Russell's diagram.

Thoughts

- Feelings don't tell us all that much about the emotion we're experiencing
 - they basically only tell us:
 - valence: whether we're attracted to the object of our emotion or repelled by it
 - arousal: how worked up we get in response to the object of our emotion
- Thoughts help to give emotions their specific colour
 - thoughts about ourselves
 - Ex. fear: *I'm vulnerable; I'm in danger...*
 - thoughts about the object of the emotion
 - Ex. fear: *That's scary; that's dangerous; that's threatening...*
 - thoughts about our relationship to the object
 - Ex. fear: *That's going to hurt me*

Some Questions for Better Understanding Emotional Experiences:

1. What does the emotion feel like? Does the emotion push me away from something or draw me closer to something?
2. What kind of thoughts does my emotion involve?

Video 3: Fear as a Response to Danger

Out all the emotions, fear as a response to danger is the best studied. Much of the information in this video comes from:

Porges, Stephen W. 2011. *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

- This book is rather technical, so I don't necessarily recommend it
- But there are more practical applications of Porges's theory such as

Dana, Deb. 2018. *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

- If you would like to understand how our bodies respond to challenging situations (like those involving fear, anger, etc.), this is an interesting read.

Autonomic Nervous System

- controls automatic bodily responses such as heartrate, digestion, breathing, pupil dilation, etc.
- we don't have to think about these responses...the body adjusts them for us
 - o think about walking up a long flight of stairs...your heartrate and breathing quicken without you're even thinking about it
- two main parts of the autonomic nervous system: sympathetic nervous system and parasympathetic nervous system
- Question: have you ever noticed your cheeks flushing when embarrassed, your muscles tensing when afraid, your heartrate quickening when angry, your body relaxing after a big meal with good company? That's the autonomic nervous system!

Sympathetic Nervous System

- responsible for so called "fight or flight response"
- primes our body to meet challenges
- often, fear involves the sympathetic nervous system
- positive aspects
 - o gives us an extra push of energy and resources that would otherwise be used for digestion and restoration of the body
 - o helps to keep our bodies safe
 - o Question: Have you ever jumped out of your seat during a horror movie? That's the sympathetic nervous system!
- negative aspects
 - o too much of this extra push experienced over long periods means our bodies are not restoring themselves
 - o makes forging social bonds difficult
 - o Question: when you're afraid of someone, do you tend to want to be intimate with that person?

Parasympathetic Nervous System

- this takes care of the bodily housekeeping during times when we're not confronting challenges
- positive aspects
 - o we need time to rest and recuperate
 - o makes forging social bonds more likely
 - o Question: when you're able to relax, do you find it easier to relate intimately with those closest to you?

Interoception

- for our purposes, interoception is basically the branch of the nervous system that allows us feel affect
 - o it's like the 6th sense
 - o it allows us to feel what's going on inside the body (organs, muscles, and other bodily tissue)
 - o Question: have you ever felt your stomach aching, your heart pounding, or your lungs burning? That's interoception!
 - o Question: when you have emotional experiences, do you sometimes feel them in certain parts of your body (heart beating, cheeks flushing, hair standing up)?
- when the autonomic nervous system revs the body up or calms the body down, interoception notices this
 - o we don't feel everything that the autonomic nervous system does, but when we do feel autonomic responses, it's because of interoception

Application to Prayer

- Questions
 - o When you pray, are you aware of any feelings?
 - o Do these feeling seem like they come from sympathetic responses (anger and fear often involve the sympathetic nervous system) or from parasympathetic responses (love and joy often involve the sympathetic nervous system)?
 - This is an interesting question for the following reasons
 - when the sympathetic nervous system is more active, the parasympathetic nervous system is less active and vice versa
 - so when my body is revved up to confront danger or a big challenge (sympathetic nervous system) my body is doing less recuperating (parasympathetic nervous system)
 - it's hard to get close to someone (maybe even God?) when the sympathetic nervous system is revved up all the time
 - o What sorts of things in prayer are likely to engage your sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous systems? Which are helpful for your relationship with God? Which are not?

Video 4: Fear of God

We can think about fear of God in three ways: fear and awe, fear as a response to danger, and transition-fear.

Fearful Awe

Mysterium tremendum et fascinans
Fearful and fascinating mystery
-Rudolf Otto

- an important kind of fear that we see in the mystical tradition
- this is a “mixed emotion,” which we’ll talk about in the next lecture
 - o there is a sense of being drawn towards the mystery
 - o but also of realizing the mystery is HUGE, POWERFUL, and not something I can control—we can only get so close (think of Moses and the burning bush)
- Question: in prayer, have you ever felt a mixture of apprehension and attraction in the presence of God? Or of being so close to God and yet far away?

Fear as a Response to Danger

- Sees God as
 - o dangerous or
 - o as a challenge to be confronted
- think fire-and-brimstone preaching
- But fear as a response to danger might also be linked to religious postures common today
 - o trying to appease God’s anger with more prayer or by beating ourselves up over wrongdoing
 - o trying to convince God to forgive me with fasting, sacrifice, charitable deeds
 - o explaining sickness, disaster, etc. in terms of God’s punishment for sin
- Some things to be aware of
 - o fear as a response to danger often engages the sympathetic nervous system
 - o this means that fear of God as dangerous may make it difficult to be intimate with God
 - o over the long run, this may be detrimental to health
- Question: How do you feel when you hear scripture passages dealing with the Last Judgment (Matthew 25)?

Transition Fear

- I adopt this idea from

Nussbaum, Martha C. 2016. *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- o This book is very interesting. It doesn’t use technical language, but it’s not a light read. Nussbaum talks about when anger is appropriate and when it’s not.
 - *(This book might help us to understand when/how anger might be helpful or harmful in the current protests.)*
- **Transition-fear: fear transitions to hope for a better future**
 - o the fear gives us a quick kick in the butt; it lets us know that something is not right and gives us the impetus to make a change
 - o perhaps transition-fear allows for the forging of intimate bonds
- Question: Personally speaking, what role does fear play in your relationships, if any? Is fear ever helpful in your relationships? If so, what makes it helpful?

Conclusion

Perfect love casts out fear.
1 John 4:18

- Over the long run, fear and love don’t work well together