

EMOTION, IMAGINATION, AND THE LIMITS OF REASON

TALIA MORAG



Emotion, Imagination, and the Limits of Reason

The emotions pose many philosophical questions. We don't choose them; they come over us spontaneously. Sometimes emotions seem to get it wrong: we experience wrongdoing but do not feel anger, feel fear but recognize there is no danger. Yet often we expect emotions to be reasonable, intelligible and appropriate responses to certain situations. How do we explain these apparent contradictions?

Emotion, Imagination, and the Limits of Reason presents a bold new picture of the emotions that challenges prevailing philosophical orthodoxy. Talia Morag argues that too much emphasis has been placed on the "reasonableness" of emotions and far too little on two neglected areas: the imagination and the unconscious. She uses these to propose a new philosophical and psychoanalytic conception of the emotions that challenges the perceived rationality of emotions; views the emotions as fundamental to determining one's self-image; and bases therapy on the ability to "listen" to one's emotional episode as it occurs.

Emotion, Imagination, and the Limits of Reason is one of the first books to connect philosophical research on the emotions to psychoanalysis. It will be essential reading for those studying ethics, the emotions, moral psychology and philosophy of psychology, as well as those interested in psychoanalysis.

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To my grandparents, Yona and Ben (Bunio) Abish

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
Introduction	1
PART I	19
1 Emotions as judgments or as modes of “seeing-as”: The explanatory challenges toward a causal account for emotional episodes	21
1. <i>The judgmentalist view</i>	26
2. <i>Objections to judgmentalism</i>	33
A. <i>The emotionality problem</i>	33
B. <i>The problem of recalcitrant emotions</i>	38
3. <i>The “seeing-as” approach</i>	42
A. <i>The analogy with the visual case of “seeing-as”</i>	42
B. <i>Emotions as modes of “seeing-as” and their relation to reasons</i>	45
C. <i>Propositionally structured construals and the care-factor objection</i>	49
D. <i>The explanatory challenges for any “seeing-as” account of emotion</i>	54
2 The sub-personalist accounts	57
1. <i>Characterizing affective processes</i>	57
A. <i>Affective processes are automatic</i>	58
B. <i>Opacity: affective processes (may) operate below the level of awareness</i>	59
C. <i>The “separateness” of affective processes (the information encapsulation thesis)</i>	62

D. <i>The affective processes for basic emotions are non-conceptual and non-linguistic</i>	64
E. <i>Prototypical outputs for the affective processes that produce basic emotions</i>	65
2. <i>The sub-personalist account</i>	66
A. <i>Affective processes are law-like causal mechanisms</i>	66
B. <i>Affective processes are appraisal mechanisms</i>	68
3. <i>The return of the care-factor problem</i>	72
A. <i>A further notion of salience</i>	74
B. <i>Individual temperament</i>	75
C. <i>Bodily readiness</i>	75
D. <i>Mood dependence</i>	76
4. <i>The problem of reason-sensitivity and recalcitrant emotions</i>	77
5. <i>The constraints on any causal account for emotional reactions</i>	85
3 The “primal scene” accounts: developmental etiologies	93
1. <i>Rorty’s “magnetized” dispositions</i>	96
2. <i>Lear’s emotional capacities</i>	100
3. <i>De Sousa’s “paradigm scenarios,” the singularity question and the problem of non-traumatic traumas</i>	106
4. <i>The “Primal Scene” accounts and the early Freudian version</i>	108
A. <i>Suppression of the emotional reaction to the “primal scene”</i>	112
B. <i>Repression of the emotional reaction to the “primal scene”</i>	118
C. <i>Unconscious emotions and neurotic (in particular emotional) symptoms</i>	120
5. <i>Insights and oversights of the “primal scene” account</i>	123
4 The primal memory accounts: the narrative approach	126
1. <i>When Freud left kindergarten</i>	126
2. <i>The story of reiterated redescriptions of the primal memory</i>	133
3. <i>The (subtle) rationalism of the narrative accounts and the return of the problem of non-traumatic traumas</i>	140
4. <i>Is there another way to understand regression?</i>	144

PART II	149
5 An associative account of emotions	151
<i>i The associative explanation for pathological emotions</i>	156
1. <i>Imaginative associations</i>	156
A. <i>Association, condensation, displacement; and similar faces</i>	156
B. <i>Broadening the scope of imaginative associations</i>	163
C. <i>The non-rationality of imaginative associations</i>	170
2. <i>Enlivening and synthesizing emotions: the associative explanation for emotional pathologies</i>	175
3. <i>Why those unconscious emotions?</i>	186
4. <i>Repression</i>	190
<i>ii Affective–associative processes</i>	198
1. <i>All occurrent emotions are mini-symptoms</i>	200
2. <i>Accounting for the prevalence of emotion-fittingness and pathology</i>	202
3. <i>Person level affective processes, the relation to reason and the singularity question</i>	210
A. <i>Emotions, judgments and reason-sensitivity</i>	210
B. <i>The singularity question</i>	216
6 The associative method of inquiry into one’s emotional patterns	222
1. <i>Free association</i>	223
2. <i>Listening to oneself, to one’s voice (and hypothesizing the series of nodal emotions)</i>	226
3. <i>“Listening” to oneself, to one’s associations (and self-management)</i>	231
4. <i>Expressing (hitherto) unconscious emotions</i>	237
5. <i>“Working-thought” one’s imaginative-emotional network</i>	243
6. <i>Changing patterns of emotional salience</i>	256
 Conclusion	 264
 Bibliography	 276
Index	283

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Introduction

What is an emotion? As with most contemporary philosophical engagements with this question, this book focuses on occurrent emotions, on emotional episodes, bouts of affect that strike us or come over us, which have a passionate, embodied, expressive, experiential aspect, an experience of a certain temporal duration. The first part of this book shows that existing philosophical accounts of emotions fail to fit the phenomenon, that is, that they fail to capture the *emotionality* of emotions. In a sense, the conception of emotional episodes proposed in the second part of this book emerges as a response to existing philosophical conceptions that do not have the resources to do justice to two crucial aspects of our ordinary experience of emotions.

(1) The very same situation or circumstances may arouse a certain emotion-type in one person and a different emotion-type in another person and leave yet another person emotionally indifferent. Imagine three friends waiting for another fourth friend, who is a bit late. One person may begin to feel angry that the friend is late. Another may worry that something might have happened to the late friend. And the third person may not feel anything at all. Indeed, the very same person may emotionally react in different ways or remain emotionally indifferent to the same circumstances on different occasions. Today the rude waiter “pushed my buttons,” as we say, and irritated me, yesterday I was amused by his rudeness, and tomorrow his rudeness may leave me completely indifferent. What changes from one day to the next? What makes me emote while you stay indifferent? I call this question *the singularity question*. The difference between my patterns of emotional reaction and your patterns is often spoken of in terms of difference in character. But saying that we have different characters is just another way to describe this question rather than answering it. And in any case, sometimes we emote out of character.¹ And although people’s emotional patterns may be quite stable, these patterns are not written in stone. At least some of them can come and go or change over time.

1 Cf. Cheshire Calhoun, “Subjectivity and Emotion,” in *Thinking about Feeling*, ed. Robert Solomon (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119.

2 Introduction

The singularity question as such is rarely mentioned in the philosophical literature, although some exceptions can be found. Jenefer Robinson, for example, whose account of emotion is discussed in Chapter 2, asks, “Why am I emotional about something on some occasions and on other occasions not? Or why does the very same event make me emotional and not you?”² But another version of this issue is so familiar that it has almost become a cliché. The cliché is about the possibility of a divergence of what one thinks and how one emotes. That is, I can think or judge or see that a situation merits anger and yet not get angry.³ Thinking or judging does not entail emoting. Philosophers of emotion repeatedly make this conceptual point and then set it aside.⁴ Yet, this consideration implies a fact about our experience of emotions that none of these philosophers care to articulate or explain, namely that we may remain indifferent in circumstances that fit a certain emotional reaction, whether or not we explicitly judge that these circumstances justify a certain emotional reaction.

(2) Another aspect of our ordinary experience of emotions, which is insufficiently explained in the contemporary literature, has to do with their unreliable responsiveness to reason. Although emotions come over us spontaneously and are not experiences we somehow decide or choose to undergo, we often expect emotions to be reasonable, to be intelligible and appropriate responses to the situation in which they arose. Indeed, often, when we judge emotional reactions to be unreasonable or inappropriate, we expect people to be able to control them and dim them down. Sometimes, people may control or dim down their emotions once they recognize their inappropriateness. Other times, such attempts to control one’s emotions through rational criticism fail. Although all philosophers have noticed the phenomenon of emotions that are recalcitrant to reason, this phenomenon remains largely under-described and unexplained.

The phenomenon is under-described since the philosophical literature acknowledges only a very limited family of cases of recalcitrance, represented by very few examples, such as phobias or persistent prejudiced emotions, e.g. disgust of homosexuals or contempt of women. In Chapter 1, I provide paradigms for further types of recalcitrance that are largely ignored in the literature, even if they are familiar from everyday experience. Perhaps the main reason for this gap in the literature has to do with the insufficient discussion of the various notions of appropriateness in reference to which we

2 Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 95.

3 E.g. Paul E. Griffiths, “The Degeneration of the Cognitive Theory of Emotions,” *Philosophical Psychology* 2, no. 3 (1989): 300; Jerome A. Shaffer, “An Assessment of Emotion,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1983): 163; Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, 14.

4 Robert Solomon also remarks that this point is a “now standard ... though it is rarely spelled out in sufficient detail.” Robert Solomon, “On Emotions as Judgments,” in *Not Passion’s Slaves: Emotions and Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 94.

judge our emotions. In Chapters 1 and 2, I explore the available notions of emotion appropriateness and add another hitherto neglected notion. I claim that recalcitrance is much more widespread than is currently acknowledged, which treats recalcitrance as a marginal and relatively rare occurrence.

I further claim that the phenomenon of recalcitrance goes unexplained in the philosophical literature, and only because certain types of recalcitrance are not even considered in contemporary debates. Any viable account of emotion should allow for both success and failure of attempts to rationally control emotions, but current accounts do not allow for such variability, familiar from everyday experience. How is it that our emotions sometimes alter and align with our normative judgments about them and sometimes not? I call this *the question of reason-sensitivity*.

The main goal of this book is to answer these two interrelated questions about the formation and subsidence of emotional episodes. In other words, the book aims to clarify the very episodic nature of emotions, entailed in the concept of emotion that philosophers aim to clarify, a conceptual clarification with an empirical dimension. Indeed, as will become evident in the first part of this book, almost all current philosophical accounts of emotion presuppose a causal story and some of them explicitly provide one, and all these accounts fail to answer the singularity question and the question of reason-sensitivity. In the second part of the book I propose a new account for the formation and subsidence of emotional episodes and clarify the extent to which reasons partake in them.

My methodology in this inquiry consists in bringing to bear on one another three relatively isolated domains of philosophy: the philosophy of emotion, the philosophy of practical rationality, and the philosophy of psychoanalysis. Each of these philosophical domains focuses on certain phenomena: emotions, reasons and reasoning, and psychological symptoms. Bringing those domains to bear on one another involves conceptual difficulties to do with the distinct terminologies and focus of each field. Indeed, the areas of overlap require the formulation of some new concepts to help articulate their bearing upon each other.

The question of the relation of emotions to reason becomes difficult once we give up – as most philosophers presume to have done – on the “judgmentalist” idea that emotions are formed through a judgment that a certain situation merits or fits an emotional reaction of a certain type. Although most agree that emotions are not judgments, emotional reactions, once verbally expressed, *appear* to embed reasons. If I am able to report that I am angry that John stole my car, then effectively I am not only describing the emotionally salient features of the situation but I may appear or take myself to be claiming that John’s stealing my car is the (normative) reason for my anger. This is precisely why emotions become candidates for rational criticism in the first place. Once a reason is given for a certain reaction, that reason can be judged to be good or bad in reference to norms of emotion

appropriateness. But if emotions are not rationally formed through a judgment, then what kind of a “reason” is this? The emotion literature does not deal with this issue, whose clarification is necessary for a better understanding of the complex relation between emotions and reasons.

Philosophers of practical rationality that talk about emotions, here represented by Tim Scanlon and Richard Moran, do not distinguish emotions from other attitudes. Indeed, they are rationalistic about emotions, in the sense that they claim that all attitudes normally are (or should be) judgment sensitive.⁵ Moran further claims that emotion formation and subsidence may occur through the grasp of reasons in explicit rational deliberation. In a sense, philosophers of practical rationality may be considered judgmentalists about emotions. But given their elaborate discussion about the nature of reasons and reason-sensitivity, which goes far beyond the discussion of any judgmentalist in the philosophy of emotion, their terminology and taxonomy of reasons is most helpful, by way of comparison and opposition, for the formulation of the relevant terminology of “reasons” for the special case of emotions.

Through a comparative study of what Tim Scanlon calls “reasons in the standard normative sense,” I formulate in Chapter 1 a new notion of a reason look-alike, which is not a reason in the standard normative sense. An emotion *appears* to embed this look-alike reason only *after* it has been described in words, but it is in fact a merely retroactive rationalization. I claim that it is verbal expression and report that makes people treat emotions as rationally assessable in reference to norms of emotion appropriateness. Rationally formed attitudes that embed reasons in the standard normative sense (such as many beliefs) are reason-sensitive, as Moran says. That is, when such reasons are revoked, the attitude is thereby revoked, due to the constitutive relation between the reason and the attitude in question. In contrast, verbally expressed emotions are not reason-sensitive in Moran’s sense but are rather susceptible to what I call normative pressure, a kind of peer-group pressure that can be more or less effective in controlling emotions, in ways that I discuss in Chapter 5.

Philosophers of emotion talk about the “motivational force”⁶ of

5 That Moran models emotional attitudes on the case of belief is evident throughout his recent book: Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Similarly, for Scanlon: T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Matthew Boyle and Pamela Hieronymi also treat emotions as analogous to beliefs as is evident in Matthew Boyle, “Active Belief,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 35, “Belief and Agency” (2009): 131; Pamela Hieronymi, “Responsibility for believing,” *Synthese* 161 (2008): 367.

6 E.g. Michael S. Brady, “The Irrationality of Recalcitrant Emotions,” *Philosophical Studies* 145, no. 3 (2009): 417, 425–426; Aaron Ben Ze’ev, “Emotion Are Not Mere Judgments,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, no. 2 (2004): 451; Patricia Greenspan, “A Case of Mixed Feelings: Ambivalence and the Logic of Emotion,” in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

emotions or more recently about their “action tendencies,”⁷ such as lashing out in anger or running away in fear. Such actions are not intentional actions that are guided by reasons, in the way that buying groceries according to a shopping list is intentional. And yet we are able to, and often do, retroactively rationalize such actions. The relation between emotionally expressive actions and reason has been widely neglected in the literature. In Chapter 3, I make comparative use of the philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe on intentional action and propose a new way to understand such behaviors as neither rational nor sub-personal. Although I focus on a very particular kind of an action tendency, I suggest that my treatment of this topic can prove fruitful for the understanding of emotionally expressive actions in general.

Perhaps the most difficult methodological challenge of this book consists in turning to Freud’s original texts in order to extract insights that are relevant to the question of emotion formation. The general attitude toward Freud today consists in an admiring skepticism that renders him essentially irrelevant. Philosophy, psychology, common culture and even contemporary psychoanalysis regard Freud as an important historical figure whose relevant insights have been assimilated and whose theories and case studies have no credence in terms of scientific evidence. “Freud bashing” by figures such Adolf Grünbaum, Frank Cioffi and, more recently, Frederic Crews, is widely accepted and there are good reasons to accept all those criticisms, given their presuppositions, the most important of which is psychoanalysis’ pretention to qualify as (experimental) science.⁸

Freud famously conceived of himself as a scientist and of psychoanalysis as a developing natural science. He declared that “the intellect and the mind are objects for scientific research in exactly the same way as any non-human things. Psycho-analysis has a special right to speak for the scientific *Weltanschauung*.”⁹ In light of Freud’s self-conception, he has been declared a failed scientist and his psychoanalysis a pseudo-science, and not without justification. This situation is a result of a chronic confusion about the status of psychoanalysis – one shared by Freud himself – that has done significant damage to the possibility of taking it seriously as an intellectual and therapeutic discipline. Crews is representative of many in remarking of psychoanalysis:

7 E.g. Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), in particular Chapter 8.

8 Adolf Grünbaum, *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis: A Philosophical Critique* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Frank Cioffi, *Freud and the Question of Pseudoscience* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998); Frederick Crews, ed., *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute* (London UK: Granta Books, 1997 [1995]).

9 Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933 [1932]), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1995 [1966]), 22, 159. Hereafter all references will use the standard abbreviation of S.E., followed by volume number.

6 Introduction

Its false therapeutic claims, its indefiniteness, its circular demonstrations, its revolutionary tone, its pretension to limitless insight, and its recourse to bluffing and slander in place of evidence all pointed to a break with the scientific ethos and a surrender to grandiosity on Freud's part.¹⁰

I turn to Freud's texts then, in the wake of these criticisms and their aftermath. I do not use Freud as an authority or as the pioneer of a new science. Rather, I read Freud's texts in order to recover fundamental insights that have been hitherto unappreciated and hence underexplored in this climate of Freud-skepticism. I agree that Freud's psychoanalysis is not a science, not even a social science and indeed it is replete with unilluminating metaphor. Like Thomas Nagel (and Jim Hopkins, Richard Wollheim, Sebastian Gardner) I agree that the psychoanalytic explanation for certain behaviors consists in or rather has the potential to consist in an extension of common-sense psychology. As Nagel says: "Psychoanalysis makes use of a complex network of interpretations, just as common-sense psychology does when it allows us to understand someone's reactions by referring to an interconnected network of desires, beliefs, emotions, memories, obsessions, inhibitions, values and identifications."¹¹

But the task of articulating how psychoanalysis relates to common-sense psychology has not yet been embarked upon, since the literature still retains questionable and obscure Freudian terminology without translating it into the language of common-sense psychology. The main explanatory concept of psychoanalysis, which is in desperate need of reconstruction or re-articulation, is the concept of the unconscious. Even philosophers of emotion who do not engage with psychoanalysis, accept without objection the existence of "unconscious emotions."¹² But what is this strange quality of certain mental states of being unavailable to consciousness, and how do certain mental states, including emotions, become "unconscious"? As long as psychoanalytic explanations speak of the unconscious by taking recourse to equally obscure concepts, such as "repression," "regression," the "Id,"

10 Frederick Crews, "The Freud Question: An Exchange," *The New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2011. See also Ken Taylor's recent blog, where he says that Freud was wrong about everything: Ken Taylor, "The Legacy of Freud," www.philosophytalk.org/community/blog/ken-taylor/2014/02/legacy-freud.

11 Thomas Nagel, "Freud's Permanent Revolution," *The New York Review of Books* 41: 9, May 12, 1994; Jim Hopkins, "Psychoanalytic and Scientific Reasoning," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 13, no. 1 (1996); Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Sebastian Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1993]).

12 See Prinz's overview: Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, 198–205. See also Amélie O. Rorty, "Freud on Unconscious Affects, Mourning and the Erotic Mind," in *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Michael P. Levine (London: Routledge, 2000); Paul Redding, "Freud's Theory of Consciousness," in *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Michael P. Levine (London: Routledge, 2000).

or “forces” or “drives” without explaining those in ordinary terms, such explanations will continue to occupy only the margins of psychological studies. Even Jonathan Lear, probably the leading philosopher of psychoanalysis to engage with the philosophy of practical rationality (and implicitly with the philosophy of emotion) in recent years, uses all these murky terms without explaining away their obscurity.

Another pervasive problem with psychoanalytic explanations, whether of Freud himself or of philosophers who take recourse to some of his ideas, consists in the unlikely supposition that very few past events or memories condition one’s later emotional difficulties in life. Although people often tell stories about themselves where they explain their faults and weaknesses in terms of past mental wounds, such stories suffer from implausibility. Unless one is a rape victim, a survivor of war, torture or natural disaster or some other extreme traumatic event, it is hard to see how a single (or even a few) moderately unpleasant events in one’s distant past would be somehow so much more important than the many other moderately unpleasant events spread throughout one’s life so as to determine one’s future emotional challenges.

This book is not the first to turn to Freudian psychoanalysis in the context of the philosophy of emotion, and Chapter 3 presents the accounts of Amélie Rorty and Ronald de Sousa, who more or less explicitly use certain Freudian ideas to explain pathological emotional patterns such as recalcitrance. But their accounts, as I show, take recourse to the concept of the unconscious without describing exactly what it entails and further ascribe to one or a few past events or memories an implausibly deterministic role in one’s emotional life. One of the main innovations of my account consists in the liberation of the concept of the Freudian unconscious from its current confusion and obscurity, which also shows how and why the past may causally influence the present without determining it.

I thus introduce a new conception of the unconscious, which can be used to explain emotional reactions, whether pathological or not. Given this explanatory aim, I do not engage in Freud scholarship in this book. That is, I do not provide a close reading of the sections of Freud’s texts on which this new conception of the unconscious is based, nor do I engage in a comparative study about the various conceptions of the unconscious that are available in Freud’s texts and in the philosophy of psychoanalysis today. Although I believe that my conception of the unconscious can be used to produce a radically new reading of Freud, I do not embark on this project here. The force of my conception of the Freudian unconscious, as I show in the book, is its use in a causal account of emotional reactions that overcomes the outstanding explanatory challenges in the philosophy of emotion.

In order to navigate among these three fields of philosophy, to critically assess and compare the available accounts of emotions, and formulate my own terminology with which I construct a new causal account for emotions,

I adhere to a pragmatic methodology, which grounds my inquiry in our ordinary experiences and explanatory practices of emotions. That is, I try as much as possible to use everyday language, the language we ordinarily use to describe our psychological states of mind to one another. I also insist on the consideration of aspects of our ordinary experience of emotions that remain largely overlooked in the current literature. As I show in the first four chapters, the emotion literature suffers from a limited variety of examples, which circumscribe the data that current accounts can, or aim to, explain. I use examples from the philosophical literature, as well as from Freud's case studies and from stories I have heard from psychotherapists and friends as well as from my own experience, to demonstrate the explanatory force of my account as well as the lack of explanatory resources of other contemporary accounts.

As said above, the book's main line of inquiry into emotions examines their formation: What causes specific individuals to undergo an emotional episode or to be emotional when they do? Since the object of inquiry, emotions, will take the whole book to clarify, I begin with a very minimal and uncontroversial notion for occurrent emotions: they have an episodic nature, that is, they are formed, they last to variable degrees and then subside; they involve prototypical physiological and often also behavioral manifestations; and they typically render certain people and things in the here-and-now emotionally salient, people and things who are often (but not always) also the trigger of the emotional episode.

The physiological and behavioral manifestations of emotional episodes can be said to be of a certain type, labeled "anger," "fear," "joy," and so forth. That is, we associate certain prototypical physiological and behavioral manifestations with emotion-types. Each emotion-type is associated with prototypical facial expressions, such as smiles for joy and frowns for anger. Emotion-types often involve typical physiological feelings, such as a racing heart when afraid or excited, or a heat sensation when embarrassed or angry. Emotions can be expressed through typical "action tendencies" such as fight, flight, or freeze for fear, revenge or shouting for anger, and crying for sadness or joy. Some emotion-types can also be characterized by activity of certain areas of the brain, such as fear and the amygdala.¹³

A specific emotional episode thus has an expressive or *affective aspect*, that is the aspect of the emotion as an experience we suffer as patients. We may and often do express our emotions verbally, whether out loud or by talking to ourselves via inner speech. When people express their emotion in words, they also effectively describe it. Emotions, in other words, also have a *describable aspect*. For example, as I feel my heart racing, my cheeks burning, and my fists clenching, I am often able to say that I am angry and

13 Paul Griffiths, "Towards a Machiavellian Theory of Emotional Appraisal," in *Emotion, Evolution and Rationality*, ed. Dylan Evans and Pierre Cruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92.

I am also able to specify the person or thing in the here-and-now situation that is emotionally salient to me. And, usually, I can also specify particular aspects of that person or thing that are emotionally salient. For example, I can say that I am angry with John, that I am angry he stole my car.

As will be explained in Chapter 1, many philosophers speak of the emotionally salient features in the here-and-now situation as the emotion's intentional object or as the emotion's target. I shall continue speaking in terms of emotionally salient features since I do not want to presuppose intentionality or targeting. What I call the describable aspect of an emotion thus includes the emotion-type and the here-and-now emotionally salient features.

This book attempts to explain only those emotions that subjects can easily describe in this manner. I thus leave aside, at least for the moment, the question of moods, those emotional states that do not make particular people and things affectively salient but that color everything in one's surroundings. In order to examine the causation of emotional episodes, I turn to their description in ordinary language, the one provided by the emoting subject, as a principle of their individuation. That verbal description is also often expressive.

This method of individuation may seem strange to those who want to know what emotions *really* are, no matter how we talk about them. Philosophers that are scientifically oriented may object to the use of ordinary language to individuate any phenomenon that is to be studied scientifically, since it is too vague and cannot provide well-regimented categories worthy of scientific inquiry. However, individuation through description in ordinary language is actually not at all controversial and is implicitly used by most researchers, whether they acknowledge it or not. In particular, empirical psychologists who conduct experiments on humans, experiments to which scientifically oriented philosophers constantly refer, usually rely on the subjects' reports of their emotions in order to individuate their object of inquiry, even if they do not necessarily trust the report to be accurate.¹⁴

In some cases, experimenters may individuate an emotional reaction through the subject's behavior, classifying it as an instantiation of this or that emotion type and specifying the here-and-now person or thing that the subject is emotionally attending to. But in those cases too, the episode is individuated by a description in ordinary language – the observer's description. This interpretative description is very likely to match the subject self-report when it comes to the specified emotion-type, unless the subject denies altogether that she is being emotional. The interpretative description may diverge from the subject's self-report when it comes to the specification

14 The many experiments surveyed in Prinz's book, all include subject's reports and some also physiological and behavioral responses. Just a few examples: Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, 30, 31, 56, 57, 70, 73, 94, 175.