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The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique

Alison Ross

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BOOK REVIEW

The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique, by Ruth Leys, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 390 pp., USD\$35 (paperback), ISBN - 13: 978 - 0 - 226 - 48856 - 1, ISBN - 10: 0 - 226 - 48856 - X

Ruth Leys' *Ascent of Affect* is a compelling and impressive history of twentieth century interest in the emotions as an object of study in the human sciences. Leys' interest in the topic dates from an earlier book on the concept of psychic trauma, *Trauma: A Genealogy* [Chicago, 2000], which was followed by her study of shame, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* [Princeton, 2007]. The new book covers in exacting technical detail debates in the philosophy and history of science and psychology, and shows how some of the contradictory commitments involved in these debates have been transported unawares into recent styles of cultural and political theory. The topic is covered through a systematic Introduction that is both an overview of the recent history of the field since the end of World War II, and a detailed discussion of difficulties in scholarship on the emotions from cognitive and non-cognitive perspectives, seven chapters, an epilogue, which gives an updated survey of the current state of the debate, and two appendices, one on animal signalling and the other on 'Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis'. Running close to 400 pages, the book uses its length for a comprehensive treatment of the literature, without losing discipline or focus. Of the seven chapters, the first five go in careful sequence through debates around the so-called Basic Emotion Theory and its competitors, involving the research of psychologists like Tomkins, Ekman, Lazarus and Fridlund, while the final two provide an analysis of how the conceptual parameters of this early basic emotion theory persist, and the specific form it takes in the case of current attention to 'affect' across a broad sweep of humanities disciplines. Other researchers whose work receives detailed critical attention include the literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the philosopher Paul Griffiths, and some of the figures associated with the English language reception of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, such as Brian Massumi, William Connolly and Jane Bennett. The book thus spans theoretical and experimental approaches to the emotions and diverse disciplinary perspectives, which endorse the primacy of affect.

Two issues can be used to synthesise Leys' account: the persistent conceptual difficulties around whether and in what respects the emotions can claim cognitive significance; and how the communication of the meaning emotions convey is handled in this literature. As she states in the Introduction to the book, one of the features of the field of the emotion sciences has been the entrenched nature of the opposing cognitive and non-cognitive positions on these issues. Even in the pages of the journal *Emotion Review*, competing positions cheerfully inhabit the covers without so much as an acknowledgement of the other's presence let alone an engagement with the (implicit) counter-arguments of the alternative view (1–3). Scarantino, who edits the journal and has also co-authored with Griffiths rebuttals of Fridlund's criticisms of the dominant non-cognitive paradigm, recently convened an online forum of *Emotion Review* aimed at airing and recalibrating differences between the major voices in the field. Leys analyses the outcomes of this forum in her Epilogue. It is unsurprising, even inevitable, Leys argues, that the adherents to the various views do not move toward a consensus view on the nature of emotion. In her account of the scholarship, the deficiencies fall on the side of the advocates for emotion as non-cognitive affect since they have not grappled with recent objections to the experimental and conceptual cogency of their chosen paradigm. Beyond her analytical survey of the debate amongst the scientists in the field, her critical

attention to the formation of emotion theory is a fascinating insight into how the term 'affect' has reached the status of an article of faith in some intellectual quarters, which are quite distant to the experimental background that established its influence. The word 'affect' has now become a casual scholarly abbreviation for the non-cognitive theory of emotional response. The objections to this theory in the field of emotion science are unknown and unreferenced. Humanities scholars eagerly document the affective dimension of historical events and political experiences, but do so unaware of the conceptual questions and experimental problems that plague the idea that affect is non-cognitive, or even with little understanding of what this idea involves.

Leys is interested in pursuing the contradictions and limitations of the positions in the field, not in developing her own theory of the emotions. Her exegetical approach is instructive, partly because it is unrelenting. Although her critical attention is distributed fairly evenly across the different voices in the debate, her book is notably unsympathetic toward those positions that celebrate the purportedly 'asignifying' quality of affect (340). *The Ascent of Affect* is a corrective to the view, further blunted through the tropes of what we might call 'received' affect theory, that the emotions are nonintentional and non-cognitive. She highlights the disregard in such positions for recent scientific research on the topic and places in the foreground important scholarship that has been confined to its sub-field and neglected in the wider use of vocabulary about the emotions.

After the scene setting task of the Introduction, her first chapter covers Silvan S. Tomkins's affect theory. Tomkins put forward a limited number of basic emotions, which he considered to operate independently of either objects or cognitions.

In the second chapter, the neuro-cultural theory of the emotions outlined in Paul Ekman's programme of research is considered. Ekman's theory develops an expanded view of the kinds of stimuli that elicit affect responses. Readers interested in this topic will also want to review the appendix on Damasio. Ekman's views have become a standard scholarly reference, despite difficulties identified in his experiments, especially those which consider the complexities of emotional display.

The next two chapters treat the topic of emotions as intentional states in Richard S. Lazarus. In these chapters, Leys shows that despite Lazarus' attempts to resolve problems in the Ekman model, his efforts do not succeed in smoothing out the difficulties in the conceptual and experimental models of emotion. Her attention moves from an outline of the conceptual difficulties with Lazarus's ideas in chapter 3, to an analysis of the terms of the debate between Robert Zajonc and Lazarus on the role of cognition in emotion in chapter 4. These chapters are the backdrop for Leys' treatment of what she considers to be the most convincing approach to the nature of the emotions.

Alan Fridlund's 'behavioural ecology view' is the subject of chapter 5. Fridlund's significance is not just that Leys' considers his view to be the only intellectually viable account on offer, but that as a former student of Ekman he has detailed familiarity with the views he criticises, and especially the shortcomings with Ekman's analysis of experimental data on the topic of emotional display.

The two remaining chapters analyse, respectively, the neglect of the work on the cognitive and intentional status of emotions in the affect theory paradigm, and the consequence of this omission in the recent turn to 'affect' across various fields in the humanities.

Beyond the criticisms made of the dominance of affect studies, Leys' analyses of particular experiments and theoretical positions on the emotions in psychology and philosophy provide extremely interesting and provocative reading. The recurring theme of how to detect the difference between genuine and performed emotions in human life is fascinating. It is salutary

to learn that the confidence in Ekman's paradigm has made his claim to distil this difference in basic emotion types a feature of our current facial recognition counter-terrorism technologies.

Leys' analyses are a model of analytical clarity. Her attention to detail keeps in view the broader stakes of particular positions. Her mastery of the literature in the different fields she covers (philosophy, psychology, and the history and philosophy of science) is impressive. The approach she takes succeeds in giving a synthetic picture of a topic that cuts across many disciplines. At a time when taking account of the emotions and the role of affect is seen to be on the 'cutting-edge' of scholarship in the humanities, with even slow-to-move disciplines like history now involved in recycling the received tropes of the idiom, Leys' history of the connections established between emotions, cognition and meaning, and the tenuous conceptual basis of these is highly recommended.

Alison Ross

Department of Philosophy, Monash University, Clayton, Australia

 alison.ross@monash.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5142-0695>

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