

*Feeling Our*  
**FEELINGS**

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*What Philosophers Think  
and People Know*

*by Eva Brann*



PAUL DRY BOOKS

*Philadelphia 2008*

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## *By Way of a Preface*

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### *On the Title*

The phrase “Feeling Our Feelings” comes from the words a little boy called Zeke said to me some thirty years ago when he was four. I was swinging him in a park in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I wasn’t doing it right. “Swing me higher,” he said. “I want to feel my feelings.” The phrase stuck with me; you might say it festered in my mind; it agitated questions. Why do we all want to feel our feelings so generally that people “not in touch” with them are thought to be in need of therapy? What feeling did swinging high induce? Was it an exultation of the body or an exhilaration of the soul? When Zeke wanted to feel his feelings, was there a difference between the general feeling, the mere consciousness of being affected, and his particular feelings, the distinguishable affects?—as, when you sing a song, there is a difference between the singing done and the song sung. Or is there?

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>1</sup>

When a dancer is dancing a dance or a singer singing a song, the grammarian *names* the occasion of Yeats’s question, calling the dance or song an “internal accusative.” He means that the verb’s object is not outside its action, that it makes the object as it acts. A philosopher, however, actually *engages* the question; Aristotle tells how we can know the dancer from the dance: A capable dancer precedes and survives the dance; even asleep he is, somehow, a dancer.<sup>2</sup> Hence you may be singing “Swing low, sweet chariot,” putting all of yourself into it, and yet remain also a singer in general.

Do we find here a usable analogy to the particular feeling of “swinging high” and feeling one’s feelings more diffusely? Do these feelings the boy wanted to call on precede and survive the thrill of swinging? Are we

somehow feeling-ready, in the sense of being ever and always, perhaps subliminally, feeling-fraught? Does that perhaps mean that our inner cosmos is thrumming with an affective background murmur, a feeling which is not *a* feeling—of love, of pride, of hate, of shame? And further, is there love, pride, hate, shame that is not *for* an object or *about* a situation? This turns out to be what philosophers call the question of intentionality, by which they mean “aboutness”: Do robust feelings always tend toward, focus on, weave themselves about an objective cause? Yet the very verb “to feel” seems to take as its grammatical and intentional objects most naturally the affects themselves—as if it awaited them—and only more attenuatedly what they are about: We feel the fear acutely, but sense the causal danger diffusely; we can feel sharp fright though we only vaguely surmise that a bear is nosing around the tent.

Of course, once you are in the question-raising mode, swarms of them come from all directions yet always tethered to one central question: What *are* we, as—perhaps ultimately—passive, reactive beings? What are we that being affected is the great voucher for our being actively alive? And there are showers of subsidiary questions as well: Is feeling sleepy or hungry the same or very different in kind from feeling love or anger? Why do we nowadays often say “I feel that . . .” when perhaps we ought to say “I think that . . .”? Why do we speak of “feelings” not of “felts” when, after all, we speak not of “thinkings” but of “thoughts”?<sup>3</sup> Is it that we “have” feelings as progressions, but thoughts are completions? And these are only a few of the questions raised by *one* affect-term, the one in the title.

In this book I try, when I am able—which is usually when I find help—to answer questions like these, and when I’m not, at least to clarify them, for I think that while straight answers are best if you can come by them honestly, the next best thing is to be very clear about the problems. Here I am assuming that questions about feeling, once they have been put in words, will cast their spell on any reader, either because of their novelty or, more often and better, because of the opposite—because we recognize that they’ve always been with us, though suppressed and postponed. Are there human beings who have not sometimes felt anything from plain puzzlement to real agony about the feelings they are feeling? Aren’t many—perhaps most—people natural experts on feeling feelings but perhaps lifelong novices at articulating that experience?

And so there is also a subtitle: “What philosophers think and people know” about feelings. Sometimes these two are one and the same, since some philosophers mean merely to put solid ground under ordinary people’s ordinary opinions, or to use what is probably a happier figure, they mean to uncover the deep roots of normal human life—not to pull and then hold them up to withering criticism, but to inspect and carefully replant

them. There are some philosophers, however, who, in searching for the basis of human feeling, are drawn to be more radical, to go to the roots in such a way as to uproot common opinions, so that human life may never look quite the same again (though even these, read charitably, will probably turn out to have illuminated what we all know). There are, moreover, yet other philosophers and scientists, especially contemporary ones, who use a derogatory term, “folk psychology,” for what ordinary people think they know, and these non-folks make it their mission to correct popular misapprehensions, mostly for their fellow scientists. Though I am wary of them, they also must be attended to because they are bound to be often right—in their own counterintuitive terms.

But why write a book in which philosophical theories play a central role? Why not just think about human feeling and report the results of my inquiry?

The reason ought to be pretty obvious. It has to do with our—my—limited capacity for originality, understood not in the sense, so inappropriate to philosophy (which ought to be truth-telling) of making up novel conceptual devices, but in a good sense of finding the ageless origins of our being. Many of us who have longed to get to the bottom of a matter—here human feeling—have learned that we are not, ourselves, able to devise the deep-rooted and comprehensive, the “original,” theory that might satisfy that longing. So we study what others have written to help us think. This task, however, is also a temptation. The philosophic text won’t help us unless we immerse ourselves in it as it is written—never mind its “background.” Yet even, or especially, if we don’t get sidetracked by circumstantial considerations, we can get so involved in construing an author’s meaning that we lose the impetus of the inquiry; we understand the text and lose the question. Then we end up with a series of meticulously clued-out accounts, and too often this investment of scholarly labor is out of proportion to the reader’s profit or ours, since the theses we have understood are not truths we any longer care about.

I would if I could avoid that damping of the life of the quest, but here’s the rub: It seems to me that the philosophers who have something persuasive or at least beguiling to say are those who think *as* philosophers about human feeling. They embed their understanding of the feeling soul in a natural and hyper-natural, that is, a physical or metaphysical inquiry, or conversely, they derive their theory of nature and what is beyond nature from thinking through what it means for human beings to feel.

Hence to get the good of their thinking about feeling and what it means to feel our feelings, it is necessary to consider the supra-human frame of their thought, be it prior to or consequent on their psychology, to capture in a reasonable number of pages the relevant elements of their whole philoso-

phy. Anyone can see the dangers and difficulties of that: To avoid becoming unprofitably prolix one might become scandalously superficial; for example, to convey succinctly the characteristic insights, one may find oneself resorting to compressed schematisms, thus traducing the depth of a design whose validation comes from the cohesion of its details.

If, moreover, the approaches are troublesome, so are the results. For though the very point of studying a number of philosophical works is to see the subject from that many perspectives, the outcome may be that one's head is filled with incoherently alternative opinions, since anyone who has undertaken a reading course on human feelings will hardly end up thinking that there is solid progress here. Indeed, as the terms of the enigma are continually reconceived, the soul may become progressively disengaged—it has all but disappeared from current emotion studies.

Nonetheless I have chosen, even in the face of these misgivings, to call on certain philosophers for help because they wrote substantially on human feelings and embedded their treatments in—or derived them from—comprehensive designs that had depth: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero (for the Stoics), Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kierkegaard, Heidegger. Since these philosophers preserve, for the most part, their personal humanity as they write of the most human propensity, what they think does not diverge so very far from what we readers know; on the contrary, it illumines, as I said, common understandings and dignifies them by showing from what point of view they make sense.

It might help readers to list the approaches to which I have in fact had occasional recourse, especially in the last chapter, but which I have *forgone* as organizing principles of inquiry. I don't pretend to offer:

1. *Continuous history*—the Herculean task, which I would be quite incompetent to attempt and few readers would wish to face, of giving a connected account, epoch by epoch, document by document, of the prevailing opinions people have had about feeling and of all the writings that articulated or influenced those views. Moreover, such an account would have to be given not only for the traditions of our West, but for the whole human world. It isn't even clear that the library-filling result would make much sense. For while it is reasonable to think that opinions which follow upon others in time—supposing it didn't (to my surprise) turn out that human beings in fact thought every sort of thing about human matters simultaneously at all times—are causally connected, that is not the same as discovering a rational descent, a coherent directed development toward something. Even biological evolutionists, who generally eschew final cause, actually have in the principle of adaptation an engine if not of a goal-directed progress at least of a cause-driven process. But what would serve similarly in tracing the evolution of the passions, which are so frequently anti-adaptive as hell?

2. *Thematic treatments*—the directly opposite approach, in which the passions are taken up in monographs one by one: love, shame, disgust, and “mood,” to give especially rich examples. This approach is full of interest, but though it has been tried, it is probably not possible to reach the nature of feeling itself through the study of this or that particular affect.

3. *Philosophical schools*—the approaches to human affectivity that have exercised so wide an influence and have been so often formulated that they may be considered as theories in abstraction from particular authors: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Associationism, Existentialism, Phenomenology, Neo-stoicism, Cognitivism, as well as physiological and neuroscientific accounts. This approach has the virtue of imposing on the expositor the obligation to get the generalized gist of the theory, which is sometimes simultaneously the vice of effacing the powerfully singular ground of thought on which stood the originators of the school. (As the reader will discover, I have not wholly avoided dealing in schools of thought, and in the last chapter Cognitivism is indeed taken up as the predominant contemporary trend.)

4. *Taxonomy*—the discerning, listening, enumerating, ranking, categorizing, and defining of human feeling. This is more difficult to do than it is engaging to read, for who can love a list, though the main labor is in it? We tend to inherit and borrow these catalogues without asking how they were first made. Did we discern them within ourselves and then recognize them in language or the other way around? We have all asked ourselves—I imagine—at some helpless moment, “What is this that I am feeling?” It is the arch-question of lyric poets: What, my heart, are you up to? How do we so inexactly, how do they so precisely, find the words? In short, how do I discern *that* I am feeling, *what* I am feeling, *whether* I have felt all the feelings there are to feel or at least that most others feel, what feelings come in opposing pairs or in related complexes, which are primary and which derivative? And, having somehow coupled my feelings with familiar names or, conversely, being presented with such a name, summoning within me a sample of an affect answering to it, how do I devise what is more than a descriptive heap of pertinent adjectives, how do I compose a definition of essential properties? All the philosophers, some crucially, some incidentally, engage in this list- and definition-making, and that is why it will turn up in this book without being my main pursuit.

5. *Conceptual history*—the tracing of the terms denoting human affect, in so far as these come into and go out of use or appear to change their meanings subtly or abruptly. This is the deeply engaging speculative inquiry into the way the ground shifts under or with terminology when “words change their meanings,” and the way these shifts indicate revolutions in

human consciousness.<sup>4</sup> It is an approach requiring much intellectual sensitivity to the way old meanings are buried—“sedimented”—in new uses. No one writing about human matters as they appear over time can avoid giving some attention to this approach; the originator is Husserl. I will use it occasionally rather than systematically.

6. *Linguistic analysis*—the fine discrimination of usage. One might call this the positivistic counterpart of conceptual history, meaning a more time-restricted, fact-directed inquiry into what people mean as revealed when they speak (in our case, English) in ordinary life. This approach depends crucially on the analyst’s ear for language, which is not guaranteed; moreover, its philosophical results are narrow.

7. *Moral connection*—the passions’ relation to virtue and vice or the emotions’ relation to morality. Almost all considerations of the passions eventually lead to the problem of their control or, at least, their management in individuals and thence to their social consequences. All the major treatments of the passions that I have read culminate in ethical, that is to say, virtue-directed or in moral, that is to say, rule-directed reflections and in the positing of the best human type. And so the most dispassionate beginnings tend to have more or less fervent endings, which I will report incidentally, as they bear on the nature of passion.

8. *Psychological theories*—the points of view that base their observations concerning the passions on natural theories of the soul (or the converse) and often only implicitly on metaphysics (or its denial): The pre-Freudian theories have been largely eclipsed by psychoanalysis, where “soul” and its parts turn into “psyche” and its depths. Perhaps the neglect of these approaches—which will be frequently though sporadically called in—is most in need of some justification. Mine is, to be sure, a speculation: I think that psychological theories that are discredited, or are in the course of being discredited, either disappear or wander over to literature as handy tropes for human depths, or enter folk psychology as ready-made accounts for human peculiarity, whence too they fade in time. Philosophical systems, on the other hand, only go into short temporary oblivion, often less than a millennium, whence they emerge refurbished with sophisticated embellishments, redone in neoteric form. I am thinking of the periodic revivals of the Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Thomistic, Cartesian, Kantian, and Hegelian approaches.

What is to be found in psychological writing that is of unclipsable interest are researches into the pathology of the passions and their social effects. That means that even those psychologists who are by profession

most strictly scientific, the physician-psychiatrists, cannot help but concern themselves with the moral questions that occupy lay thinkers about human affectivity: Are people whose emotions are out of control sick or bad; are they victims or instigators of evil?

I need hardly excuse the fact that the multitude of therapies devised yearly for the relief of the emotional miseries of the modern condition are, more or less respectfully, set aside here.

9. *Emotions in the arts*—especially in literature and music. What work of language from Homer’s epics onward, what composition of notes beginning with the Greek modes, is not an enterprise in expounding or expressing particular passions and the passionate life in general? This activity is not a field of inquiry, but the reflective remaking of the world itself. “The Emotions in the Arts” seems to me an absurd title, precisely because one could hardly write a book about feelings without constant recourse to their artful expression, be it poetic, narrative, tonal, visual. I shall, in fact, begin with some pretty wild lyric poetry by some of those supposedly rationalistic Greeks.

10. *Physiology*—last, but the opposite of least, the somatic or bodily approach to the passions and emotions, which have always been felt in the body and thought of as somehow somatic. This question has been a perennial preoccupation: Are the bodily “feels” in the breast or groin or skin of the passionate essence or are they mere epiphenomena of human feeling? The school that went for the body as the locus of emotions, initiated by Darwin and made explicit by William James, set the course for what is now the liveliest and most influential approach to the emotions: their physiological origins in the states of the body and their neurological reflections in the neural patterns of the brain. I will recur to these theories (insofar as I grasp them) when they bear on our conscious experience of feeling our feelings—which is just where the explanatory power of neuroscience becomes most fascinatingly questionable.

You might now think of my approach—that by way of picked philosophers—as a kind of spot check on the state of reflection on human affectivity or, in the way I do, as a hitting of the high points that will best help me to make sense of myself—and of the world, natural and human-made, then and now, passing and perennial, the world that impinges on me by instilling or eliciting feelings in me. The final recourse has, of course, to be what I know of myself, and what you know of yourself—“what people know.” “What philosophers think” could not even so much as raise the question for us unless it already were a sleeping passion of our soul waiting to be roused.

But then the articulation of the questions can initiate the multiple clarifications that are the prerequisites for forming those stable views we can live with and, when push comes to shove, live by.

Finally, a note on terms: I have begun with “feeling” and put the whole book under that title, but in the review of various approaches other terms necessarily appear and take center stage. So I will sketch out some first distinctions among the most common words, which should become more precise as the philosophers speak for themselves. The first and oldest term is “passion” (Greek *pathos*): a strong, natural affect, under which we are passive rather than active, which we suffer in both senses of being pained and being victimized; “pathology” is a revealing related term. Therefore passion traditionally implies a soul capable of being subjected, even abjectly so, to feeling—and yet strong enough to be masterfully ascendant through thinking. Love and pride are thus the prime passions.

At a certain time “passion” yields to “emotion” in English. “Emotion” comes from *ex-movere*, Latin for “moving out [of its place],” “stirring up,” and the emphasis on passivity under external influence yields, correspondingly, to an interest in the internal motive force and its artful expression. These multifarious psychic displacements and their objects become the focus of psychology, while their poignant description becomes consciously the province of art.

“Feeling” tends to be used in English in the most general sense I began with, as sensitivity to, or awareness of, our physical or psychic state—though sometimes it has a harder edge, denoting the “feels” that are closest to the body and have the least articulate definition, particularly pleasure and pain.

“Affect” is, if anything, even more general, referring to any excitation the human constitution undergoes, usually as opposed to cognitive activity, but in at least one great case, Spinoza’s, including it. “Sentiment” tends to carry a sense of diffuseness, often of flabby mildness. Its derivative, “sentimentality,” has long denoted degraded feeling—emotional schmaltz and artistic schlock. Heartfelt insincerity and lax impassionedness are deeply puzzling human modes, but bypassed here, as being just one thing too many.

At last, “mood”—which becomes, so it seems to me, the most interesting affect of modernity—comes to be defined as a feeling without an object: We fear a bear (not every bear, of course, not a teddy bear, but the scary sort of bear that turns up in a lot of the literature on fear), but we have anxiety about nothing in particular. It might be said, speaking roughly, that when philosophy is metaphysical, love is the moving passion; when it becomes existential, anxiety is the revealing mood. Consequently what certain philosophers think about this affect, and how that does indeed differ from what people know, will be taken up toward the end.

*Usage Note:* The reader will, I hope, forgive my shifting use of the pronouns “I,” “you,” “we,” “one,” a practice for which I persecute my students. I am sometimes giving my own opinions, sometimes appealing to the reader’s experience, sometimes relying on our common humanity, and now and then playing the impersonal spectator.

*Westport, Mass., May 2005*  
*Annapolis, Md., June 2008*