the changing profession

Professor Emily Casaubon Studies the Emotions

BLAKEY VERMEULE

THE TROUBLE STARTED WITH AN ULTIMATUM. EMILY CASAUBON, AN ENGLISH PROFESSOR, WAS IN LINE FOR A NEW OFFICE.[1] BUT FIRST, THE kindly departmental administrator told her, she needed to purge some books. The administrator was right: Professor Casaubon's books were cresting and flooding like the spawn of the Philistine god Dagon—"sea monster, upward man and downward fish," as John Milton pithily put it—in full run. She got right to work.

The book on top of the nearest pile was *What Emotions Really Are*, by Paul E. Griffiths (1997). She scanned the glowing blurbs on the back cover ("makes a strong claim to be one of the best books to have emerged on the subject of human emotion"—Ray Dolan, *Nature*). Griffiths was an Australian philosopher of science. His book looked very professional and densely argued. She had scratched out some notes and underlined some passages, but had she got the gist of the argument? She couldn't remember. She felt a surge of shame mixed with the usual hidden serpent, academic pride. Surely her colleagues Carp, Pike, and Tench would never have become so muddled and forgetful. She was torn about whether to dive in again. The title made her anxious. The jacket designer had set off the word "Really" in a pleasing salmon pink. Could the word be trusted? Professor Casaubon yearned after the essences of things, but she had come to suspect that the antiessentialists were right. She had blindly groped after such magic formulas only to find her hands scored by hidden brambles and the answers flicking away like drops of mercury.

Then again, the title was tempting. What if hidden in these pages were sentences that would tell her what emotions really were? One book into her task, she abandoned it, sat down, and started to read.

The "Really" in the title turned out be polemical. The target of the polemic was professional philosophers. They had failed to take into account the last thirty years of scientific research about the emotions. They had carried on philosophizing in their old way ("in the armchair") without so much as a glance at "empirical investigation of emotional phenomena" (1).

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The empirical sciences? She had looked rather deeply into the matter and felt sure that in 1997 the empirical sciences had little in the way of a story to tell about the emotions, let alone one robust enough to set self-respecting philosophers back on their heels. Of course, she had the benefit of hindsight. The landmark books—LeDoux, Panksepp, Damasio—did not appear until later, and their progress through the intellectual world was as lumpy and uncertain as these things ever are. But the reality was that metaphors mattered, language mattered. In the 1990s, cognitive science was still what it had been in the 1960s, a science of information processing and artificial intelligence. The master metaphors were rooted in computers: the mind was likened to a processing unit and series of data-storage mailboxes—the von Neumann architecture of early computational neuroscience. "Affective neuroscience," a term coined by Panksepp, was considered, however bizarrely, to be different from neuroscience.[2] The 1998 edition of the textbook *Cognitive Neuroscience* (Gazzaniga, Ivry, and Mangun) contained no chapter on emotions and little information about them. That wouldn't change until the 2004 edition. She also knew that the philosophical study of the emotions had grown more empirical since 1997.

None of this mattered—Griffiths was landing his punches. The philosophers were compared on the very first page with the wrongheaded scientists in Aristotle's day who devised special theories to separate objects that were above the moon ("superlunary") from those below it ("sublunary"). She felt relieved, as though she had just missed being called out for naughtiness in school.

But that was cowardly. Her bookshelf was a shrine to the same philosophers, their books lined up alphabetically, from Plato on down through his footnotes. Here were titles that promised answers: *Consciousness Explained*, by Daniel Dennett (was it really explained? did the explanation stick? did people accept the explanation? did they wish he would explain his explanation?); *The Language Instinct*, by Steven Pinker; *Key Ideas in Human Thought*, by Kenneth McLeish; *What Evolution Is*, by Ernst Mayr; *Invariances*, by Robert Nozick. Then came the big, bold, end-stopped nouns modified by confident adjectives: *The Ethical Brain*, by Michael Gazzaniga; *The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins; *The Symbolic Species*, by Terrence Deacon. A slew of "mapping" titles—*Mapping the Mind*, *Mapping the Brain*. (Why always the mind or the brain?) Finally, two by two into the ark went the whys, hows, and whats. *Why Sex Is Fun*, by Jared Diamond; *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, by Robert Sapolsky; *How the Mind Works*, by Pinker (again). Why this or that happens or exists. How it all works. How it happens. What it is. (Her own book, eternally in progress, marched down the middle. Rather than *The Key to All Minds*, she was thinking of calling it *What Is the Key to All Minds?* Or, more tentative, *Is There a Key to All Minds?*)

The titles on her shelf were markers of tribal identity, but the tribe had split off from hers more than a century ago, like the Danes from the Icelanders. Their dialects had diverged. Some words looked identical but meant opposite things. Their styles differed too. Her tribe went for sweepingly ambiguous titles that diffused agency instead of promising answers. Her tribe preferred making to mapping, fashioning to explaining. Its favorite preposition was *in*, a word that yoked the vast and the particular together like the pinch in the center of an hourglass. (In graduate school, her friends used to joke about the kinds of titles people came up with: "Reality Unbound: Cosmopolitan Universalism in Swinburne's Middle Period.") For a while the style was to begin with a reflectively casual *on*, an anglicization of the Latin *de*, though the most famous title of this sort, *On Bullshit*, came from the pen of a philosopher. Her tribe wrote as if the historical waters were always rising around them and something impossi-

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bly grand and obscure was at stake. The other tribe—the philosophers—wrote as if they were clearing a patch of ground in the sunny uplands of rationality.

She had long been drawn like a moth to the bright lights of philosophers, to their confidence, their style. Like many English majors before and since, she had entered professional life in the grip of an illusion that refused to be advised away. In college, lovely college, she had fallen in love with the odes of John Keats. Simply Keats, and Shelley too. She had toddled into the profession (this was in the early 1990s) only to be blown backward by a typhoon of moralizing. To say she had been naive would be putting it kindly. No profession existed so that its members could bask in the lambent gaze of Psyche. But her profession seemed then to be tumbling through a giant fault and into a state of war with itself. Over claims about the literary past that were also, confusingly, claims about personal identities. Over the New Criticism, formalism, historicism. Over race, class, and gender. Over which books to read and why.

She didn't want to be at war. She never felt that literature should be yelled about or over, but that feeling only shunted her to the side of the whirling track, from which she watched everyone else go furiously around. She came to understand her refusal, her blindness, as a yearning for childish things only later, when she read Melville's *Benito Cereno* and encountered Amasa Delano, the self-pitying and obtuse captain of the *Bachelor's Delight*. Delano, a man who both believes in his own innocence and uses it as a defense against seeing the true condition of Don Benito Cereno and the Africans on Cereno's slave ship, was hardly a less sympathetic figure than Emily Casaubon in her puzzled graduate school days. The war had come—a pale, literary war—and wishing that she could just splash about on her childhood beach of poetry with her duck satchel in hand would do her no good (Melville 203). Nothing was to be done but join up and take sides, man the barricades, and yell as loudly as possible.

This was ancient reverie. As she read on, she found Griffiths's book deepening like a coastal shelf as one moves from shore. Distinctions were drawn, a research program defined. Griffiths was offering a theory, by which he meant something technical and specific to his tribe: philosophers—the very tribe he had been criticizing for its inward gaze and parochialism. Theory was for him a procedure for clarifying outlines, tracing an ontology, getting a clear view of the matter, and cutting as close as possible to the bone of a thing with the knife of language. Emotions, Griffiths argued, were not one thing but a mishmash, a hodgepodge. They were not "a natural kind"—his tribe, once again, was mistaken. Lumping the emotions together had caused so much confusion that the word *emotion* was no longer useful for science. The philosophers were drawn to conceptual analysis, which meant trying to figure out what emotion really was by thinking it through, breaking it down, articulating it down to the joints. (She remembered a story that a famous philosopher told in a seminar. He and a fellow philosophy student were serving in the army. They were instructed to take a machine gun down into 27 pieces. They took it down into 216 pieces and ended up with a pile of parts. That machine gun was his metaphor for how philosophers proceed.)

But theory meant exactly the opposite for her tribe. It taught people how little they understood their own convictions, how mystified they were not only about the truth but even about their hope that there was such a thing as the truth. Theory put enormous pressure on one's certainties. It was a solvent that unmade everything: belief, knowledge, principles, identities, concepts, gender. Her tribe—Carp from Brasenose, Fish from Duke—had fashioned out of beautiful French fabrics a tent called theory. The tent rose like an exhalation across from the edifice of Western philosophy

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in order to oppose its categorical nature. In that opposition her tribe joined (but all too briefly) in a common project, a common purpose. Theory sheltered her tribe during what she had come to think of as the long debate, a debate that was also an unwinding. Easy to see now in hindsight: "Theory is what breaks out when agreement about terms such as text, reading, history, interpretation, tradition, and literature can no longer be taken for granted," Gerald Graff wrote (191). Now it seemed to her that the noise had died, the tent had emptied. This was sad but in keeping with John Dewey's maxim that "intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest" (Alexander 26). The end of war wasn't peace but indifference.

She once met an elderly couple at a hotel breakfast table. The man had been an English professor—probably not one of the few whose life and opinions made a great noise in the world but a hard worker and a teacher and a writer and an adviser, a mentor to the young. He had grown frail but still had bright blue eyes and a raffish blue gemstone in his ear. By the time he retired, he said, he could no longer recognize his discipline, so quickly had it morphed into something beyond his ken. In the photocopying room, especially, seeing what his younger colleagues copied left him mystified ("a treatise on dismemberment!"). Professor Casaubon could picture the scene easily: a young person in a hurry, the old man perhaps literally standing in the way. Mutual suspicion wrapped in bonhomie. The young scholar barely concealing resentment that the older one had got in when jobs were plentiful and hadn't faced the same inhuman pressures to publish. But the young scholar would be careful not to show contempt. The older scholar represented, after all, a possibly negative tenure vote. For his part, the older scholar might have wanted to offer a word of encouragement and interest but did not know where to begin or whether such a word would be taken as condescending, perhaps even offensive. The old man no doubt had his own resentments. Perhaps he felt that he was being made irrelevant too soon or was being thwarted in his socially important function of assimilating and guiding the young.

Back to philosophy: Griffiths seemed to feel that conceptual analysis was hopelessly flawed, even as he practiced his own version of it. (Professor Casaubon could see the irony—indeed, her graduate training had taught her to shine an olisbos-like flashlight into just this sort of methodological blind spot. "You go to your graduate seminars," an old hand advised her, "because you know what's wrong with an argument and you want to take it apart." So she had grown attuned to authorial mystifications, moments of false consciousness, and misprisions of all kinds. The idea was to read with a sort of "gotcha" in the back of one's throat, a knowingness greater than that of the hapless and purblind author on the block. The more you could find such blind spots woven into a method, the better. Never mind that when it came time to put one's own thoughts down on paper, the habit of "gotcha" would turn into a mind-forged manacle of such monstrous power that nothing could release it).

For Griffiths the biggest roadblock to understanding the emotions was thought itself. Thinking about emotion will not get a person very far inside the question of what emotions are. Concepts have their own solidity, which blocks the view beneath them. Emotion concepts create the very effects they purport to discover. These effects were often subtly normalizing, ideological. (Griffiths drew what she felt was a wildly infelicitous analogy to make his point: "Using these concepts as a guide to the emotions is like studying female sexuality by reading pornography.") Then the finale: philosophers would be better off reading some history, some sociology, than trying to bore down into the facts of the matter with

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their own "conceptual analytic activities" (201). She began to suspect that the title was intended to be ironic, a rebuke to those readers who thought they could discover by the force of their own minds what emotions really were. And she could not stand apart from and revel in this irony—it encompassed her too, a reader eager to discover what emotions really were by reading a book.

Professor Casaubon had grown up in a New England family that took a dim, Edwardian view of the expression of emotions in human beings and animals. When she moved to California for graduate school, she was often hit by the injunction "Feel your feelings," as though such a thing were easy and only mulishness or lack of self-knowledge could block such a powerful and obvious source of insight. Yet she found herself reverting stubbornly to type. She clammed up as the Boston spinster Olive Chancellor does when mesmerized and horrified by the latest demand of the chatty Verena Tarrant. "Feel your feelings" seemed not psychological guidance but a moral demand. Her feelings often squalled up like a storm, but the ability to name them came later, if at all. She could never name them without the sense that she was lying, ventriloquizing the feelings through an uncanny dummy perched on her lap.

Griffiths's book was devoted to sorting out this phenomenological puzzle, which had come to be called the "two-factor" view of emotional understanding (Gross 18). Emotions had their automatic elements and their "higher cognitive" elements, and the mystery was the shape of the paths between the two kinds of elements (Griffiths 9). Most theories of the emotions, from William James onward, were devoted in one way or another to hypothesizing how "core affects" interacted with awareness, words, speech, stories, insight, planning, and the accessible parts of the mind.[3] Professor Griffiths hadn't solved that puzzle, but he did restate it in strong philosophical language.

But—here was the nub of the issue—how can concepts explain or even interact with emotions? Are concepts like the fellow with the push broom who comes along after the elephants have left the circus tent? Or are they like a light stick plunged into a dark sea, creating plankton blooms and drawing up vast clouds of bioluminescence? In the past ten or fifteen years, a consensus had grown up in the academic world that reason was a powerless rider (a mouse or perhaps a flea?) sitting atop the elephant of emotions and futilely yelling, "Giddyap!" (Haidt, *Righteous Mind* xiv).

Psychologists now distinguished between automatic processes, which dictate most of our behavior, and controlled processes, which, despite what we like to think, dictate only a tiny part of what we do. Reason believes it controls our behavior, but it doesn't. Control is a cognitive illusion created by the fact that we have more intimate access to the processes we control than to the ones we don't. Compared with our automatic processes, there are still

> lots of bugs in the reasoning and planning programs. Automatic processes, on the other hand, have been through thousands of product cycles and are nearly perfect. This difference in maturity helps explain why we have inexpensive computers that can solve logic, math, and chess problems better than any human being can (most of us struggle with these tasks), but none of our robots, no matter how costly, can walk through the woods as well as the average six-year-old child (our perceptual and motor systems are superb).
>
> (Haidt, *Happiness Hypothesis* 15)

(Here came mind-as-computer metaphors again, as entrenched as the Soviet military at the peak of its powers.) Reason arrives late to provide an explanation, to tell a "plausible little story" about the world (Hirstein 18). Confabulations, as such stories are called, are a feature of every cognitive system: vision, hearing, memory, temporal processing. But

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emotions are especially subject to after-the-fact storytelling.

Perhaps the most disturbing news for somebody whose interminable intellectual labors are not immune to inward sores came from the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. Damasio wrote several books on how emotions allow us to think. He coined the term "somatic marker hypothesis" to describe the subtle and poorly understood feedback loop between different brain regions associated with emotion and with thought. Our emotions mark "options and outcomes with a positive or negative signal that narrows the decision-making space and increases the probability that the action will conform to past experience" (148). Damasio's most groundbreaking claim was that forethought arises in part or even largely from emotional signaling (147). Here was neuroscience coming around to the most extreme position taken by the anti-Cartesian and antidualist philosophers—Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty. The sort of theory favored by Professor Casaubon's tribe was now gaining powerful and perhaps unlooked-for allies among the mind scientists.

Professor Casaubon had spent her life assembling fragments of paper and trolling through the written records of a culture, and she left little monumental deposits along the way, parerga and a few paralipomena too. She found neuroscience and its social science cognates thrilling—a world of new knowledge opening up in real time—but she had severe doubts about its explanatory powers in culture, especially because neuroscience was being touted in all corners as the key to all mythologies. The problem again lay in the reach of language. The body could experience all kinds of emotional states to which consciousness had little access: "some of the best evidence for unconscious processing comes from studies of emotional processing, which is particularly resistant to verbalization" (Ledoux 312). To pretend to certainty or even a few halting sentences on this score was hubris. (Professor Casaubon looked anxiously at the next book on her surging pile: *Explaining Emotions*, by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. Lower in the stack she could see *My Life*, by Lyn Hejinian, a book where she knew she would find a compassionate and beautiful homage to the tempest of dialectical phrases that, in her own brain, kept crashing into one another.)

Casaubon thought about one of the strongest acts of literary explanation she knew of—explanation that was also catharsis—and how it guarded at its heart a commitment to not knowing: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf claims to have healed her broken heart caused by her mother's death—a broken heart that became an obsession—by writing that novel. But what was the nature of the healing exactly? How did it work? Woolf puzzled over that question.

Julia Stephen died when Woolf was thirteen years old. Decades later Woolf remembered that at the time she felt nothing: "Even as I was taken to the bedside, I noticed that one nurse was sobbing, and a desire to laugh came over me, and I said to myself as I have often done at moments of crisis since, 'I feel nothing whatever.' Then I stooped and kissed my mother's face. It was still warm. She [had] only died a moment before" (*Moments* 92). Julia Stephen lingered in her daughter's consciousness like a ghost:

> Until I was in the forties—I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it—the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. . . . [O]ne day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles?

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> Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.
>
> I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of "explained" it? Why, because I described her and my feeling for her in that book, should my vision of her and my feeling for her become so much dimmer and weaker? Perhaps one of these days I shall hit on the reason; and if so, I will give it, but at the moment I will go on, describing what I can remember, for it may be true that what I remember of her now will weaken still further. (80–81)

What indeed is the meaning of "explained" "some very long felt and deeply felt emotion"? Woolf tried to work that question out in the novel. Lily Briscoe, the novel's artist heroine, wonders what she feels. She loved Mrs. Ramsay, and now Mrs. Ramsay is dead. She feels blank (as Woolf did). "For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all" (*To the Lighthouse* 145).

Lily wonders why she can't arrange her feelings like a bouquet of flowers and make them publicly available. Mr. Ramsay, especially, wants access to them. He demands sympathy. She resists but worries that resisting makes her "not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid." She fears that to resist giving sympathy signifies that she is infertile, unavailable. Why can't she even act the rapturous availability she is used to seeing on the faces of other women?

> Surely, she could imitate from recollection the glow, the rhapsody, the self-surrender, she had seen on so many women's faces (on Mrs. Ramsay's, for instance) when on some occasion like this they blazed up—she could remember the look on Mrs. Ramsay's face—into a rapture of sympathy, of delight in the reward they had, which, though the reason of it escaped her, evidently conferred on them the most supreme bliss of which human nature was capable. (150)

But she can't, and she feels therefore that she has failed at an essential task of her gender.

As she talks about her painting with old Mr. Carmichael the poet, she finds herself crying and wonders why. "Her eyes were full of a hot liquid (she did not think of tears at first) which, without disturbing the firmness of her lips, made the air thick, rolled down her cheeks. She had perfect control of herself—Oh, yes!—in every other way. Was she crying then for Mrs. Ramsay, without being aware of any unhappiness?" (207). She wonders what it all means, but meaning never arrives as language. It never shapes itself into a set of propositions. Instead, her artistic vision, which she has on the novel's last page, is the fulfillment of her quest. Her painting aligns all the disparate threads of consciousness and emotion that have escaped her and vexed her throughout her journey.

Professor Casaubon loved these modernist chestnuts about art and world making, even though she would never admit this in public. She sometimes thought that she labored in a monastery that sustained itself by hawking explanations—the academic gift shop out front was a portal, actually, through which materialism had for centuries been seeping into the rest of the world. But behind the gift shop, behind the smithies and workshops, even behind the pigeonholes where she kept her papers, Professor Casaubon watched the art she loved jump around explanation's lasso.

Notes

1. The Casaubon delusion is the search for ultimate explanations.

2. This point was made by Stephen Kosslyn to a seminar at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavior Sciences at Stanford in the summer of 2012.

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3. For a general overview of this literature, see Barrett et al.

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