



Writer's block

Description

The monk dipped his quill and positioned it over the parchment again. His fingers were black and smudges formed on the unyielding page. Drops of ink found their way to the frayed cuff of his robe. "How can I be expected to do this!" he said. "What task has the Abbot set you now?" I asked. "I've been told to pen no more than three dozen words about a particular human frailty, without actually naming it." "What's the word?" "It's *frustration*!"

Phenomenology and emotion

Presumably an adept writer conveys the mood without naming every occurrence. But language is complicit in emotional experience. Evidence for the importance of language comes from Phenomenology, which looks to the totality of human experience prior to breaking it into elements such as cognition, reason, logic, emotion, sensation, imagination, and action.



Saint Aidan of Lindisfarne, Northumbria

How does Martin Heidegger deal with emotion? He asserts that we are *oriented* to the world around us, and to particular things in our experience. This is *Being-towards*.

I think he implies this orientation is necessary before you can have an emotion.

It's convenient to speak of being attracted to a place or person in terms of love, joy, pleasure, fascination, etc, but it's unlikely those feelings are experienced constantly in relation to that object. It's only when you think about the love object, or the object in a particular way, that the feeling arises. Something similar applies to the converse – aversion to an object.

Evidence for the indeterminate and fleeting duration of *feelings* comes from sensing technologies such as [EEG](#). Feelings seem to come and go over seconds. It's the orientation that persists and is evident in movement, habit, practices, and actions – the whole apparatus of our –extended cognition. •

Orientation establishes momentum. In fact *emotion* implies *motion* towards, as if pointing in a particular direction. Anyone might give vent to their orientation through the language of emotion, as if experiencing a long-standing condition of happiness, excitement, grief, hope, anxiety or frustration.

Phenomenology accords with those ethnographers who elevate the role of language and other cultural practices in how we identify and experience emotion. (See [Where do emotions happen?](#))

This doesn't diminish the authenticity of people's long term deeply-felt grief, anger, happiness or frustration. Rather it indicates how our experience is bound up in language. It's as difficult to shift from one emotional condition to another as it is to change the way we speak.

Interaction between person and world

Here's an instructive explanation on Heidegger and emotion (in *Being and Time*) from Michael Hyde and Craig Smith:

Heidegger (1962) recognizes that emotions function primordially as vehicles for the active sensibility of human beings; that is, they provide the perspectives for seeing the world as interesting, as something that matters and that warrants interpretation (pp. 172-182). Emotions are not primarily psychical phenomena originating purely from one's inner condition; rather, they take form in the interaction between a person and the world, as the world is perceived by the person through an act of consciousness. In this way, an emotion orients a person toward the world in a "concernful" manner (p. 176). They go on to write about mood as "generalised emotions permeating a person's existence." (74)

Hyde and Smith then explain Heidegger's insistence that we are always projecting forward, anticipating and in a condition of "not yet." This discussion links concepts of time with emotion. They make the connection with rhetoric (Aristotle), which is ostensibly about knowing your audience before you speak to them. I think the language connection is also strengthened in Heidegger's later writing where he affirms language as "the house of Being."

References

- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie, and E. Robinson. London: SCM Press
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. Building, dwelling, thinking. *Poetry, Language, Thought*: 143-161. New York: Harper and Rowe.
- Hyde, Michael J., and Craig R. Smith. 1993. Aristotle and Heidegger on Emotion and Rhetoric: Questions of Time and Space. In I. Angus, and L. Langsdorf (eds.), *The Critical Turn: Rhetoric and Philosophy in Postmodern Discourse*: 68-99. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Category

1. Culture

Tags

1. emotion
2. Heidegger
3. mood
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