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On being convinced: an emotional epistemology of international relations

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I am convinced that emotion plays a central role in world politics. But I am not sure why I am convinced of this. In fact, I am increasingly skeptical of my own conviction. To establish emotions' significance for world politics requires a logically robust theory of the relationship among emotion, collectivities, and action. The theories we use for this in international relations (IR) are logically unstable. Even the best work on emotion collapses without much pressure. Even my own work collapses. So why do I remain committed to the idea that emotions are central forces in world politics?

In this commentary I reflect upon my own stubborn commitment to this evidently fragile idea. Since I am not alone among IR scholars in remaining committed, against reason, to favored ideas, this exercise is not just auto-ethnographic. It explores the broader scholarly experience of 'being convinced'. It also yields two theoretical provocations regarding emotion. The first, ironically, is that emotion may matter even more than our (unstable) theories have suggested. Emotions may shape not just world politics but also our knowledge of it. IR rests on an emotional epistemology. Second, though, those who are not already (emotionally) convinced of emotion's importance in world politics are unlikely to be persuaded by recent state-of-the-art neuroscience-based research. More logically robust arguments may be possible through a theoretical focus on affect.

Convinced

The idea that emotion is a key force in world politics has always had a following. I am a relative newcomer. I was drawn in when painstaking empirical research that failed to support my expectations redirected me toward emotion. Since my concern was to understand the propensity of transnational crime networks (TCNs) for violence against international society, the prospect of a humanizing, emotional explanation was, well, uncomfortable. It was also theoretically challenging. To pursue it I would need a convincing theory of emotion and its operation in and between collective actors in world politics. Such would require resolving two theoretical problems that have long dogged emotion theory in IR: the levels-of-analysis problem, or how the subjective emotional experience of individuals ‘scales up’ into collective forces that shape outcomes in world politics; and the causal process problem regarding the mechanism by which emotion (individual or collective) translates into action in world politics. I thus began my ‘emotion turn’ with considerable trepidation.

My hesitance did not last long. Like many emotion researchers in IR, I discovered neuroscience, and with it, solutions to my theoretical problems. Neuroscience research has now explained – that is, legitimated – two features of emotion that humanists and social scientists have long suspected. The first is that emotions are intersubjective social phenomena as much as they are biological subjective ones. The reason, neuroscience teaches, is that emotions are not ‘things’ that humans just ‘have’, They are experiential capabilities that we acquire as the ‘neuroplastic’ human brain co-evolves with social environments (Crawford 2014, 535–57). The brain’s neuroplasticity implies a theoretical solution to the levels-of-analysis problem for it suggests that emotions are encoded in the social contexts of world politics as much as they are in individual biology. This is exactly the logic behind Crawford’s proposal that fear and empathy are institutionalized in world politics. It is also the theoretical basis for Mercer’s (2014, 515–35) argument about group emotion and ‘feeling like a state’, So, I realized, could neuroplasticity found a theory of TCN emotion of ‘feeling like a TCN’.

The second neuroscientific finding regards the relationship between emotion and cognition. Conventionally treated as distinct processes, it turns out that emotion and cognition are neurologically indistinguishable. They are ‘inseparable’ as brain activations (Mercer 2014, 515–35). The implication is that all of the cognitive processes that IR scholars already accept as crucial to behavior in world politics – reasoning, perceiving, believing, identifying, etc. – are inseparably emotional processes. Hence, the ‘emotion/cognition nexus’ resolves the causal process problem: it connects emotion to

action through cognition. In fact, inasmuch as most action in world politics is reflective and so cognitively mediated, the emotion/cognition nexus indicates that emotion has causal import *most of the time*. Emotion plays a central role in world politics.

This revelation, and the cognition/emotion nexus that spawned it, has been a key reason for the growth of emotion studies in IR. It is, for instance, why (Mercer 2014, 515–35) – who is interested in what identities ‘are’ and ‘can do’ in world politics – theorizes group emotion. Identities mediate action through cognitive processes that must also therefore be emotional ones. It is also why Crawford focuses her inquiry on the behavioral implications of fear and empathy. After all, if most action in world politics is emotional action, the relevant question is not whether emotion matters, but which emotions matter, for which behaviors, and through which cognitive processes.

The emotion/cognition nexus also came to define my own project. It allowed me to move beyond the question of whether ‘feeling like a TCN’ could be connected to TCN violence against international society and to focus instead on which feelings mediated that connection. The emotion/cognition nexus clarified my theoretical task and made its execution logically possible. Through it, I became convinced that emotions could be central forces in world politics.

Suspicious

But that same neuroscience has turned on me. The emotion/cognition nexus that clarified how emotions could be so important in world politics ultimately also refutes the very possibility.

Consider this: to theorize emotion as a force in world politics one must have a conception of emotion. The emotion–cognition nexus, however, tells us that emotion is neurologically indistinguishable from cognition; that emotion and cognition are ontologically identical but intelligible as neither. So how are we to conceptualize emotion? And why would we even try? The emotion/cognition nexus calls not for greater attention to emotion but for a radical reconceptualization of human experience and consciousness. It evacuates the concept of emotion, denying its theoretical possibility and with it, the idea that emotion is a force in world politics.

Although I am intellectually aware of this I have not owned up to it. Mercer, too, flirts with the implications of the emotion/cognition nexus but, ultimately, also backs away. Trying to distinguish emotion and cognition as causes, he notes, is like trying to slice a cake into the sugar and flour that went into it (Mercer 2014, 515–35). But his analogy betrays him for the indistinction between emotion and cognition means that, unlike flour

and sugar, neither could be made conceptually intelligible (Mercer 2014, 515–35). Against reason, Mercer represses this implication. He persists in trying to deploy emotion as a conceptual and analytic category (Mercer 2014, 515–35). Crawford, too, persists against reason. She expressly denotes fear and empathy as emotions despite the fact that the very concept has, by her own terms, no content (Crawford 2014, 535–57). She defines empathy, for instance, as ‘a feeling related to the cognitive ability to take another person’s perspective’ (Crawford 2014, 535–57). But since feelings are ‘descriptions of inner states’, and descriptions are cognitive abilities, it is hardly clear what is emotional about empathy (Crawford 2014, 535–57). It is so only by fiat of conviction. In this way, the emotion/cognition nexus undermines the very idea of which it originally convinced me.

Emotional Epistemology

Why, in spite of this, do I remain attached to the idea that emotion matters? The same question may be asked of any IR scholar about the ideas of which they are convinced. A considerable proportion of IR scholars are convinced, for instance, of the centrality of power, interests, and identity in world politics. But if we probe the conceptual and theoretical foundations upon which those convictions rest the way I have just done with emotion, they appear no more reasonable than my own about emotion. None have been established as central forces in world politics on the backs of theorizing that is any more conceptually robust than emotion.

Recognizing this, Janice Gross Stein (2008) has poignantly asked why IR scholars wring their hands so over the ‘fuzziness’ of emotion even as we reconcile ourselves to, or even embrace, similar fuzziness on the discipline’s core concepts. Her question at once exonerates emotion theories for their vagaries and begs broader questions about the nature of knowledge in the discipline. What does it take for we as scholars – practitioners of a vocation that is defined and enacted by the application of reason (Jackson, 2011) – to become convinced of the ‘rightness’ of an idea? Clearly, reason is not the whole story, for if it were we would not remain attached to the validity of ideas that rest on fragile, collapsing foundations.¹⁵ The question then is why and how we allow ourselves, and our discipline, to stray from reason’s authority.

Convinced, against reason, as I am of emotion’s significance, I am drawn to an emotion-centered explanation. We might become and remain

¹⁵ Critical theorists have long pointed this out but not paid explicit attention to the role of emotions.

convinced of an idea, even in the face of its questionable integrity, because we are literally physiologically moved, or affected, by it (Ahmed 2001). We experience the idea in an embodied, sensual way that constitutes not just *how* we think but *what* we think and what we are *able* to think (Panagia 2009). The more intensely we are drawn to an idea, the less capable we are of perceiving its logical frailties or rejecting it. It is not, then, that we *allow* ourselves to stray from reason's authority. It is that even in our scholarship reason never trumped emotion as an authority in the first place. The suggestion, contra neuroscience, is that emotion is more than just a brain activation. It is also a bodily experience that can be prior to, in excess of, and sometimes an opposing force from cognition.

My story is admittedly notional. It also rests on a different view of emotion than that counseled by the emotion/cognition nexus. It accepts the neurological indistinction between emotion and cognition but it also takes 'inner states' and non-conscious bodily action, or affect, seriously. It refuses to analytically defer the whole of emotion to what neuroscience has taught us. But this is precisely why my story has something significant to say about being convinced; about knowledge in IR. It suggests that, in the first instance, we, as scholars and as a discipline, favor ideas about world politics less because they are backed by rigorous logic than in and through their (individual and/or collective) affective force. IR, it suggests, is founded ultimately on an emotional epistemology.

Emotion Theory

This matters for theorizing emotion in IR. If IR rests on an emotional epistemology then the long-marginal standing of emotion research in IR may have less to do with its theoretical problems than with the affective weakness within IR of the idea that emotion matters. Perhaps neuroscience has helped somewhat, unleashing the affective force of the idea for some people – like me. But most remain unconvinced, in spite of high-tech neuroscience.

For we, The Convinced, this should shape how we theorize our convictions about emotion in world politics. It should caution us that 'non-followers' entertain our arguments through a form of reason that is *not* inflected by positive affect. Such reason would not likely countenance overlooking, as we evidently do, the emotion-refuting implications of the emotion/cognition nexus. This should warn us that, unless we intend to talk only among ourselves, we need to find ways to back our convictions with more logically compelling theories. We need to face up to the limits of neuroscience for it is neuroscience that, in reducing emotion to a type of brain activation, evacuates emotion of its conceptual and analytical intelligibility. Affect-centered theories, like that which I suggest above, offer promising alternatives. In focusing on

non-conscious bodily experience and expression, they identify a distinctive dimension of emotion without rejecting neuroscience insights.

Affect approaches entail problems, too, though. Affect always involves experiences that are, as Freud knew, in excess of and inaccessible through feelings, perception, reason. Affect *unleashes* emotion from cognition. This begs the question of whether affect can be made conceptually and analytically intelligible, either. Can one craft a tightly reasoned theory about a force that often cannot be apprehended through reason? If not, there seems little point in trying to engage non-followers. Only a sympathetic emotional epistemology can effectively repress the logical calamities contained in our emotion theories.

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