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Commentary on Claudio Duran's "Revisiting Emotional Arguments in the Context of Western Culture"

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Professor Duran rightly laments the privileging of traditional logic over emotions in Western culture. The Platonic argument he presents, that emotions are irrational because they cannot be "connected to the sequences that are characteristic of logical reasoning" and therefore should be "controlled and hopefully repressed" (p. 3), exists explicitly and implicitly in much of our public discourse and certainly in our academic systems.

His goal is to reposition emotions as a valuable aspect of human interactions and a necessary component for establishing social order. To do so he must first free emotion from the label of "irrational." Since "rational" is equated with "logical" he turns to Matte-Blanco's theory of Bi-Logic that explains emotions as a kind of logic. According to Bi-Logic, our thinking consists of both traditional logic and symmetrical logic. Emotions follow the latter, working by complete identification of the elements under consideration. And while the PS is a different kind of logic, it still "assumes traditional logic as operating all the time" (p. 6). Professor Duran then relates Bi-Logic to Michael Gilbert's theory of Multi-Modal Argumentation that argues for the legitimacy and importance of emotional arguments in any consideration of human disputation. In these two theories Professor Duran finds thought and emotion intimately related, rather than opposed, thereby helping to remove the label of "irrational" from emotion.

Despite this progress, Professor Duran is not completely satisfied with Bi-Logic or Gilbert's theory of emotional argument since both continue to rely on traditional logic, either mathematical-logical concepts or structures of premises and conclusions. The very solution to rescuing emotions from the realm of irrationality, by understanding emotional thinking as a kind of logic, presents its own difficulty. Professor Duran pushes further, asking, as he concludes his paper, how can we "deal with emotions from the perspective of emotions?" (p. 11), implying that true redemption of emotion would only come when it is recognized as valuable in its own terms. Defining what that would mean is a daunting task; as he points out, the work on emotions is vast, but we can further the discussion by considering other efforts to reconcile emotions and reasoning. First, however, I would like to consider in more detail what the theory of Bi-Logic does or does not provide to our understanding of emotions.

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To apply the PS to emotions is to address the thought process that is the source of the emotion. As Duran explains in the example of Paula, her desire is strong because she identifies her entire life with being a doctor. The theory rightly ties the emotion, desire, to a thought process. The PS emphasizes, “the thinking that appears in emotion is an inherent part of it” (p. 7). This may be stating the obvious, but, as he also pointed out, in Western culture, emotions have been radically separated from thought, each commonly defined in opposition to the other. Thus, to point out that emotions come from some connection of ideas is important.

However, it seems to me that the PS in Bi-Logic fails to capture the richness and nuances of our emotional operations. For example, as I understand it, the PS assumes but does not account for the presence of *values* in emotional thinking. Paula’s emotional desire can only be explained by her valuing being a doctor as a good because it equates with her life, also a good. In contrast, what if Paula is being pressured to become a doctor by her parents but she is vehemently opposed? In an argument with them, she might state, “My life will be over if I become a doctor.” Thus, we might see the PS here, but it produces despair or anger, rather than desire. Perhaps Matte-Blanco treats the production of specific emotions in other areas of his work, but I think an explanation of emotional thinking should address the related value judgment, which the PS alone does not.

Also, to claim that all emotional thinking operates by identification seems too limiting in other ways. Consider if Paula’s reason for desiring the A was that without an A she would lose her scholarship and have to stop her education? In this case she is not identifying her life with her education, but rather citing a good she values and a possible *cause* for her losing it. We could find many examples in which emotions do not result from parts being identified with the whole (PS). And although Duran acknowledges there can be many levels of symmetrical depth, it is not clear to me how something can be symmetrical by degree. Things are either identical or not. Once there is some difference, they are no longer identical.

In light of these misgivings regarding Bi-Logic and of Duran’s wish to explore emotions from the perspective of emotions, I would like to look briefly at how emotions are dealt with in rhetorical theory and coherence theory.

For rhetoricians, emotions have always been an important and necessary aspect of effective argument, working in concert with logic. Although there is much written on pathos, I will just give a very basic explanation using Aristotle. He presents emotions as an important tool in persuasion in so far as the speaker can put her audience into the right frame of mind, so as to be predisposed to agree with the argument. In Book I he states,

[There is persuasion] through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion [pathos] by the speech; for we do not give the same judgment when grieved and rejoicing or when being friendly and hostile” (1.2.5).

This fact, that emotions do affect our judgment, is precisely why emotions have been condemned, seen as interfering with logic. But Aristotle presents emotions in the service of reason, rather than its enemy. He also discusses emotions as influencing the argument through ethos—are the speaker’s emotions appropriate, showing similar judgment and values as the audience?

In explaining how to use emotions for rhetorical effectiveness, Aristotle first defines emotions as, “those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to

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differ in their judgments and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure” (2.1.8). For example, he defines pity as

a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful evil happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer” (2.8.2).

So we feel pity for those prudent and hardworking people who have recently lost their financial savings, through no fault of their own, but because of the downturn in the economy. In this case we judge the event as bad and undeserved and that judgment evokes an unpleasant feeling Aristotle simply describes as “pain.”

We find similar descriptions of the emotional process in contemporary coherence theories that posit we evaluate new information in light of how it fits or does not fit with what we already know and accept. Coherence is central to explanations of narrative rationality that claim we think in terms of narratives (stories) that include not simply sequences and causes of events, but human motivations, values, beliefs, etc. In narrative rationality, coherence is much broader than logical validity, as it includes a range of human factors. (Fisher 1989)

But more closely related to the field of argumentation are coherence theories of inference and decision-making. Paul Thagard, describes decisions as based on epistemic as well as emotional coherence. He explains coherence generally as,

When we make sense of a text, picture, person, or event, we need to construct an interpretation that fits with the available information better than alternative interpretations. The best interpretation is one that provides the most coherent account of what we want to understand, considering both pieces of information that fit with each other and pieces of information that do not fit with each other. (Thagard 2001, p. 360)

The fitting together or cohering can take place in a variety of ways, through “explanation, deduction, facilitation, association,” etc. And each element within a system has an emotional “valence,” either a positive or negative attitude associated with it. He uses the example of “dentist” as having a negative valence for many people. (He acknowledges that positive and negative valences do not fully account for complex emotions; rather he provides general descriptions of how more complex attitudes operate.) The valence of elements comes from the valences of all the other elements to which it is connected. The negative valence of dentist comes from its association with pain. For Paula, the positive value of the A comes from its relation to another positive element, medical school, which is connected with being a doctor, the apparent purpose of her life. Thagard’s theory of epistemic and emotional coherence allows for a variety of relationships among elements, thus freeing us from the confines of traditional logic, and it accounts for the feelings those relationships evoke.

This cursory look at how coherence theory and rhetorical theory treat emotions suggests some ways to account for emotions that recognize their connection to reasoning, as Bi-Logic does, but also for the value judgments corresponding to that reasoning. Whether we can consider either of these theories as treating emotions from the perspective of emotions remains an open question.

[Link to paper](#)

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