



The Relation between Emotion and Intellect: Which Governs Which?

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Abstract

This article contrasts two beliefs about the relation between the emotions and the intellect. Each sees emotional responses as fundamental and primary sources of thinking. Each sees a different role for the intellect following emotional responses to worldly phenomena. L. S. Vygotsky, articulating a belief common at his time, sees the intellect as a disciplining force, one that, after a pause or interlude, serves to temper emotions to produce a “catharsis” and what he calls “intelligent emotions,” those subjected to rational thought and a higher plane of cognition than either emotion or intellect could produce alone. Jonathan Haidt, following Vygotsky by nearly a century, asserts that emotions control cognition, rather than as Vygotsky conceives, being subordinated by reason. Haidt, in the tradition of David Hume and with more empirical data than Vygotsky provides for his view, sees the passions ruling human thought and action. Any accompanying reason serves to rationalize gut feelings rather than to control them; reason, Haidt argues, is a “rationalist delusion” that gives emotional thinking the veneer of reason. This article outlines both positions and attempts to reach a synthesis of their views.

Keywords Vygotsky · Reason · Emotion · Haidt · Cultural mediation

Introduction

“A rational, cultivated person should ‘not give way to amazement, not laugh, not cry, but understand’ as Vygotsky paraphrased [Spinoza] in the preface to ‘The Psychology of Art.’ . . . One should always attempt to control one’s emotions and subject them to the control of the intellect. . . . One should never give way to the lower passions, but rather climb the rational ladder and be more refined and detached in one’s

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judgments. . . one should never become the victim of one's moods and passions.” (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 15)

“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend any other office than to serve and obey them.” ~David Hume, 1739

These contradictory views of the relation between emotions and cognition serve as the crucible that has produced this essay. Van der Veer and Valsiner's (1991) summary of Vygotsky's perspective on the relation between emotion and intellect characterizes an essential premise of Vygotsky in his formulation of a comprehensive developmental human psychology: A person should be in control of emotions, and not let them overtake rational thought. The person of culture thus disciplines and subordinates emotions to the tempering and reasonable influence of the intellect, acting not out of passion but out of the “intelligent emotions” that follow from a delayed, reflective response that enables a new realization to emerge.

This view has more recently been challenged by Haidt (2012), who takes the perspective that emotions are primary, a view he locates in the philosophy of David Hume. The application of the intellect to emotional feelings, he argues, does not control them. Rather, it justifies them post-hoc to align them with ideological gut feelings and inclinations. The idea of intellectual control, then, is more a chimera than a reality as people's thinking and actions are largely emotional.

This paper will explore the tensions surfacing in this disagreement. My tack is similar to Vygotsky's Hegelian reliance on thesis-antithesis-synthesis. I use Vygotsky to outline a thesis—that emotions become subordinated to intellectual control and thus regulation—that I then contrast with a second thesis, that being Haidt's research into emotions as the guiding force in human behavior and with “reason” a patina applied to justify them. Each provides an antithesis for the other. By examining their assumptions and empirical support, I seek to develop a synthesis to help resolve their very different understandings of the human psyche. This process is described by Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) in Vygotsky's analytic and rhetorical approach:

For Vygotsky any two opposing directions of thought served as opposites united with one another in the continuous whole—the discourse on ideas. This discourse is expected to lead us to a more adequate understanding of the human psyche, that is, to transcend the present state of theoretical knowledge, rather than force the existing variety of ideas into a strict classification of tendencies in the socially constructed scientific discipline of psychology. . . . For Vygotsky it was the reasoning against other viewpoints that could lead his ideas to reach a breakpoint for a novel synthesis. (p. 393)

My approach relies on detailing the two opposing directions of thought provided by Vygotsky and Spinoza, Haidt and Hume, and endeavoring to push toward a novel synthesis.

Vygotsky on Intelligent Emotions

Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) conclude that, even as Vygotsky devoted considerable attention to the emotions, a fully-articulated theory of emotions was among the projects that he left unfinished in his short, brilliant career. Indeed, to Leontiev (1997) “the attempt to objectively analyze the emotions caused by [art’s inherent contradictions] were not successful (and could not be successful in view of the level of development of the psychological science at the time)” (p. 13). Vygotsky’s principal conclusions are that emotions and the intellect are integrated rather than separate; and that the emotions are primal responses that are brought under control by the intellect. This perspective was evident from his doctoral thesis on *The Psychology of Art* (1971/1925) and developed in his later essays specifically on the role of the emotions in human development (1987b, 1999; see Smagorinsky, 2011).

Vygotsky’s Western Heritage and its Impact on His Conception of Emotions

Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) review how Vygotsky’s perspective has broad cultural grounding. His environment embodied the values built into the European Enlightenment’s foregrounding of scientific reason as the means for addressing social problems. This philosophical foundation included an ethnocentric premise: that European intellectual culture is the highest form of human organization. The Age of Reason was a European movement, one that provided the storehouse of values for those raised under its influence and assumptions, even as Vygotsky was clear that the non-Soviet parts of Europe were hampered by their Christianity (which had worked to subjugate the Russian Jewish population, including Vygotsky’s family) and their capitalism. The Age of Reason helped to justify the global colonization of lands under European military, political, and cultural rule with the goal of either eradicating native people and their “primitive” ways, or forcing them to adopt European religion, social structures, and other means of organization. This effort included the exportation of Enlightenment rationality, which provided the logic behind genocide and oppression around the globe.

Vygotsky also appeared to embrace a monocultural, ethnocentric understanding of emotions. In the twenty-first century’s psychological environment, however, emotions are understood in more nuanced ways. Differences in appropriate emotional response and display have been found across European nations and in contrast with the U.S. (Hareli, Kafetsios, & Hess, 2015). Lim (2016) has found that Eastern and Western cultures understand and express emotions differently. There are further differences in emotional life between Western cultures and those from outside these dominant global cultures (Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010). Vygotsky’s view of the superiority of Western societies, especially those adopting socialist or communist economic systems, brings to mind George Bernard Shaw’s postulation that “Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it,” assuming that Belarus’s ultimate inclusion in the Soviet Union qualified him as a native.

Vygotsky's belief in the primacy of cultures like his own indicates a conundrum in his career. His research has been referenced for its attention to cultural mediation in ways that have enabled cultural pluralism to be recognized as a societal value and empirical fact, with comparative human cognition generally employed to promote respect and inclusion rather than social hierarchies (see Cole, Engeström, & Vasquez, 1997). Yet his own beliefs positioned cultures like the one envisioned at the outset of the Soviet Union, especially those founded on rationalism coupled with a classless economic structure, as optimal and as the capstone of human progress toward which all others should aspire. Or, as happened under Stalin, toward which others should die in order that the New Soviet Man¹ could be rapidly evolved.

These beliefs in Western superiority—absent the dispute arbitrated by Vygotsky between the relative sustainability of capitalist and communist economies, and omitting his dismissal of religion as a mystical rather than rational undertaking—continue to undergird international cultural hierarchies outlined by those who see themselves at the top of the heap. They also find themselves under siege by those from various “post” positions that argue for a distributed notion of authority in general, and an anti-hegemonic view of Eurocentric ethnocentrism of the sort exhibited by Vygotsky.

The Psychology of Art and Intelligent Emotions

Vygotsky formulated his perspective on reason and emotion in his first formal scholarship, his meditation on *The Psychology of Art*, with a focus on Shakespeare's character of Hamlet, among other literary figures. His attention to literature as art foregrounds another value he held, that being his logocentric bias on the primary role of speech in human development. His attention to art barely touched on sculpture, painting, music, and other nonverbal media. Rather, he stated that he had difficulty understanding diagrams and other graphic texts (Haenen, 1993). He was steadfastly focused on three developmental themes: “Words, words, words” (Van der Veer, 1997, p. 7; cf. Vygotsky, 1987a/1934).

This primary orientation to speech led to at least two oversights. One was the mediational potential of other sign systems, as John-Steiner (1987) detailed in her study of high achievers across the modes of disciplines. Wertsch (1991) referred to this repertoire as a *cultural tool kit* driven by a semiotic understanding of communicative and representative mediational means (cf. Smagorinsky, 2001). The other error was the assumption that a baby's biology is the principle developmental factor through the first two years in life, until the onset of speech enables the child to become cultural and begin the process of mediated self-regulation. As Cole (1996) argues, however, more recent studies have found that socialization begins with the first human contact, suggesting that culture is transmitted through more than words.

Vygotsky's orientation to speech as the “tool of tools” (Cole, 1996, p. 108) has some salience in the discussion of emotions, given that he believed that emotions

¹ I retain all language from sources without endorsing it when it includes a sexist orientation.

may be brought under intellectual control through the affordances of language, steered in a proper direction by a speech-mediated intellect situated within a culture and its channeling of values and ideology. To Vygotsky, word meaning was the principal unit of analysis for understanding human concept development within cultural contours. Words tame the emotions, and bring them under control. Through this process, the intellect ultimately rules the content and direction of thoughts that follow from emotional responses to art and other areas of life.

Vygotsky (1971/1925) saw literature as an art form that relied on both emotions and the subordinating role of the intellect, in relation to a work's form, to produce an elevated state of mind, and body given his attention to breathing during reading. A text's form and content steer the reader toward an elevated emotional experience, one that rises above both the reader's prior state and the humble qualities of individual words assembled to produce the literary work. Vygotsky again betrayed an elitist's sense of artistic quality, featuring masterworks and speaking condescendingly of the art of the people, including children, even as he recognized the developmental value of crude, unsophisticated productions in their growth and the social value of events such as ritualistic community singing and dancing.

A central construct in Vygotsky's (1971/1925) formulation is what he calls a *catharsis*, a term he adapts from Aristotle, to whom it denotes "the essence of aesthetic experience as cleansing the soul from affects and giving 'harmless' delight" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 155). A catharsis, argues Vygotsky, follows from the social subconscious element of art's effect on the individual.

His definition of catharsis goes beyond the relatively simple notion of an emotional purge or release. It involves the generalization from personal emotions to higher human truths that becomes available through a transaction with a work of art. Both emotion and imagination are central to this process, which transcends the visceral and involves a delay in which the imagination elevates the response: "The emotions caused by art are intelligent emotions" (p. 212) involving "an affective contradiction, causes conflicting feelings, and leads to the short-circuiting and destruction of these emotions" (p. 213). This process leads to "a complex transformation of feelings" (p. 214) and results in an "explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions" (p. 215). These emotions are then subjected to the intellect, which overcomes, resolves, and regulates feelings through a process of generalization of those feelings to a higher plane of experience.

The Emotional Dimensions of Everyday Drama

Yaroshevsky (1989) reports that in 1929, Vygotsky jotted, "Dynamics of the individual=drama.... The individual as a participant in a drama.... Psychology is humanised" (Yaroshevsky, p. 217). This dramatic quality suggests that psychology should focus on a person as "a character of the drama of life on the social stage" (p. 219). Vygotsky saw a strong relation between real human dramas and the theater, each of which includes mediation that serves to help understand and regulate human emotions. Vygotsky took up these issues in later essays and lectures in which he maintained that "The emotions are one of the features which constitute the character

of an individual's general view of life. The structure of the individual's character is reflected in his emotional life and his character is defined by these emotional experiences" (1987b, p. 333).

Vygotsky (1999) argues that "Our affects make it clear to us that we, together with our body, are one being. It is specifically passions that form the basic phenomenon of human nature" (p. 164). This orientation to unity and wholeness characterizes Vygotsky's approach to psychology, one that led him to reject Descartes, James, Lange, and others who conceived of emotions in a mechanistic and dualistic way that separated mind and body and were indebted to the sort of reflexology that Vygotsky ultimately rejected in Pavlov. In contrast, argues Vygotsky (1999), "Consciousness must not be separated from its physical conditions: they comprise one natural whole that must be studied as such" (p. 228).

This sense of the whole extended the individual into the environment such that the mind "extends beyond the skin" in at least two senses: it is often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 14). Vygotsky applies the notion of catharsis to "the stage of life": the everyday drama that people experience in which emotion, cognition, and personality are intertwined with sociocultural-historical context. How they are connected relies on cognition's role in the regulation of emotions, disciplining them so that their role is intellectualized, tempered, and elevated.

Haidt and the Primacy of Emotions

Nearly a century after Vygotsky worked on his dissertation on *Hamlet* and began to explore the role of emotions in human development, U.S.-based evolutionary psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) published *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, a book-length synthesis of ideas he had been developing about people's moral reasoning. He has studied how people respond to hypothetical dilemmas about moral action, concluding that people do not think solely, or even primarily, through rational analysis and argumentation. Rather, they first and foremost respond through gut reactions, which they then rationalize through whatever justifications they can come up with, in a form of confirmation bias. In doing so he endorses Hume's view that reason is the slave of the passions. Reasoning in this conception does not involve "cold cognition," a logical, emotionless sorting through of facts in order to arrive at a sound conclusion (Roth, 2007). Rather, people respond primarily through what he calls "intuitions," or deeply-felt, gut-level, often unconscious feelings. They then provide for their feelings a justification that has a logical structure and gives their thinking the appearance of rational cogitation.

Haidt's (2012) task is more specialized than Vygotsky's project of developing a comprehensive developmental human cultural psychology. Rather, he wondered why people on the political left and political right tend to consider the other to be illogical and driven by passion, while they themselves are impeccably logical and intellectually responsible. How, wonders Haidt, can it be possible for both to hold this same view of themselves and their antagonists? How can both think so differently, yet consider their process analytical and logical and their opponents' process emotional, weak, and irrational? His conclusion is that gut feelings, rather than their

efficiently reasoning minds, are responsible for the positions people take. Their logic is applied after the fact to justify them. The permeating influence of the European Enlightenment then suggests to them that their logic is what produced the beliefs, rather than serving in a subordinate role to account for the passions.

The Elephant in the Room

Haidt provided an analogy to illustrate his views: The passions/emotions are the elephant of the mind, a massive, powerful entity that is difficult to steer. The intellect is like the rider on the elephant trying to control it. Critically, these two are socially situated such that there's more to the scenario than just a rider on an elephant. There are destinations, constraints, influences, and other social factors in play. Haidt describes the situation as follows:

- The mind is divided into parts, like a rider (controlled processes) on an elephant (automatic processes). The rider evolved to serve the elephant.
- You can see the rider serving the elephant when people are morally dumbfounded. They have strong gut feelings about what is right and wrong, and they struggle to construct post hoc justifications for those feelings. Even when the servant (reasoning) comes back empty-handed, the master (intuition) doesn't change his judgment.
- The social intuitionist model starts with Hume's model and makes it more social. Moral reasoning is part of our lifelong struggle to win friends and influence people [to which Haidt adds on p. 106: "We are obsessively concerned about what others think of us, although much of the concern is unconscious and invisible to us"]. That's why I say that "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second." You'll misunderstand moral reasoning if you think about it as something people do by themselves in order to figure out the truth
- Therefore, if you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, *talk to the elephant first*. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch—a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed. (p 59; emphasis in original)

To accept this analogy, one needs to set aside knowledge about real elephants and simply accept Haidt's passion-elephant as a large, dominant, and uncontrollable symbol for the emotions.² The passions dwarf the reason that tries to control them, leaving cognition in the driver's seat of a vehicle that has a mind of its own.

² People who have co-existed with elephants are not necessarily like Haidt's hapless rider struggling to control the uncontrollable (Mackenzie & Locke, n. d.). Thai people, for instance, have served for many generations as elephant keepers, working more relationally with them. This phenomenon is on display in the films of martial arts star Tony Jaa, who grew up in rural Thailand alongside wild elephants and incorporates them into his movies. A stunning example appears in "The Lord of the Elephants," a scene from *Ong Bak 2* in which he controls not just an elephant, but a herd of them (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQG8y0kJqdY>). Of course, this scene was orchestrated and edited, but in interviews the filmmakers have talked about the difficulties of filming with elephants, and how those who grew up with them have developed relationships that enable them to direct and act with them in movie scenes.

The Rationalist Delusion

The façade of the subordination of emotion to reason, says Haidt, produces “the rationalist delusion” (p. 103) that he might, if he engaged with Vygotsky’s writing on emotions, consider him to be exhibiting. Interestingly, Haidt claims that inherent in the rationalist delusion is the belief that “the rational caste (philosophers or scientists) should have more power, and it usually comes along with a utopian program for raising more rational children” (p. 103). Back in Stalin’s Soviet Union, the bourgeoisie (i.e., the rational caste) were considered to be threats to the utopian idea of a classless worker’s paradise, with ill-prepared people from the proletariat often called upon to replace highly educated and experienced people of the sort Haidt asserts are the ideal outcome of a rationalist society, who were sent to labor or worse to punish the sins of their upbringing (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

Haidt extends his studies of people responding to moral dilemmas—a method derived from Kohlberg (1976), whose own research relied exclusively on male research participants, a problem addressed by Gilligan (1983)—to people acting in the social sphere in the realms of politics and religion. His work gains credibility in the ways in which, in the present-day U.S., political polarization is rampant, as is the belief that one’s opponents are overly emotional and irrational, no matter which side one falls on. Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) note the ways in which history has disconfirmed Vygotsky’s belief in rationality on several fronts. How can people be ultimately rationale if they make such poor decisions about such issues as the earth’s climate? These doubts find grounding in the current bifurcation of political beliefs and the ways that information is manufactured to support gut feelings such as racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other fear-based reactions.

Discussion: A Quest for Synthesis

The task of synthesis would no doubt require another century of investigation. My efforts here are nascent, designed to explore the emotion-cognition conundrum more than resolve it. It may help to contrast the ways in which the two antagonists in this essay came to understand their views. Vygotsky, as Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) observe, was not necessarily a careful documenter of his research methods or findings. His work can come across as lacking empirical support and perhaps impressionistic, at least as reported. His study of *The Psychology of Art*, undertaken during a long period of illness in his teens and twenties, was more a humanities-style project of armchair literary criticism than the sort of laboratory study he later did as a clinician, and so does not include reports of evidence expected of twenty-first century social science research.

What appears to be the case is that Vygotsky relied on his own ethnocentric cultural immersion in his formative societies in Belarus and then the Soviet Union to formulate his view of the principal role of the intellect in controlling the emotions. The Age of Reason insinuated this belief into the fabric of European cultures such that it became naturalized and seemingly beyond the need to document, to such an extent that it persists today. In a parochial era where people primarily were exposed

to their own cultures, those from others could only be judged in deficit terms in the eyes of any beholder (e.g., Luria's, 1976 study of the impact of broad societal change on the thinking of residents of remote villages and mountain pasturelands of Uzbekistan and Kirghizia in the 1930s). Vygotsky's internalization of this belief was typical of Europeans (and of many in today's world), leading to the "rationalist delusion" that Haidt might find in Vygotsky's account of emotions and intellect.

Haidt's perspective has greater support from the sort of research expected in the twenty-first century, that which includes a systematic, theoretically-motivated analysis of data, reported in detail. Haidt's method might be considered a form of the double-stimulation method that Vygotsky felt was critical to undertaking cultural-historical research, in that it involved a research setting and a stimulus of hypothetical moral dilemmas to solve, often involving what Haidt describes as deliberately "disgusting" ethical scenarios (p. 45) designed to elicit an emotional response: eating human flesh, having sex with a sibling, and so on. Like Vygotsky, he is a product of his time and place; I have noted, for instance, his heavy reliance on male psychologists to make arguments about emotions, a topic on which women have made many important contributions and indeed can be described as leading authorities (Smagorinsky, 2018). Like Vygotsky, he argues against the orthodoxies of his day in a dialectic fashion, although without the risk of death undertaken by dissidents in Stalin's Soviet Union.

Similar to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991), I look out and see a world that is not governed by rationalism. They observed that.

The optimistic conclusion to be drawn from Vygotsky's account of human history is that one could see definite progress in two respects: modern man surpassed his precursors through (1) his superior domination of nature through technology, and (2) his improved control over the self through "psychotechnology." It would take the Second World War and the later general environmental pollution to make people seriously doubt these claims. (pp. 220-221)

And the doubts continue to pile up in 2021, in an era in which Haidt's view that people are divided emotionally more than rationally appears to have strong confirmation.

My provisional effort at synthesis would thus lean toward Haidt's view that emotions drive human conduct and thinking, and away from Vygotsky's postulation that people control their emotions intellectually as part of a broader evolutionary trend toward a more rational species, one embodied by the New Soviet Man. Whether my conclusion is based on a gut feeling or my rational analysis is open to debate. And now, if you'll excuse me, my elephant is saying it needs to go for a walk, and needs a rider to justify the route it takes.

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