

# Emotions as ways of knowing

Psychology



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Emotions as ways of knowing It is the traditional view claims, the emotions are more of an obstacle than a source of knowledge, we still need to look at them and consider how to guard their disruptive influence. It could, however, be argued that the emotions , play a more positive role in our mental lives and that without them we would be unable to make sense of the world. We also need to take a closer look, at the nature of intuition. For some of our most fundamental beliefs seem to be more emotional matters of the heart than rational matters of the head. This gives us an agenda for the rest of this chapter. In the next three sections, we look at: 1. emotions as an obstacle to knowledge 2. emotions as a source of knowledge 3. intuition

Emotions as an obstacle to knowledge Since emotions are an integral part of our mental lives, they are likely to influence the way we see and think about the world. Strong emotions can sometimes distort the three other ways of knowing.

Perception Our perception of things can be coloured by strong emotions, and there is doubtless truth in sayings like 'love is blind; and 'fear has many eyes'. Such emotional colouring can make us aware of sonic aspects of reality to the exclusion of others. If, for example, you are in love with someone you are to be blind to their faults; whereas if you loathe them you are likely to see their faults.

Reason Reason can also be negatively affected by our emotions, and if you hold your beliefs with too much passion, this can prevent you being open-minded and lead to a 'my theory right or wrong' kind of attitude.

Language A person in the grip of a powerful emotion is likely to use slanted and emotive language. You can find many examples in everyday life of the way in which emotions can undermine our ability to think clearly. At some time or other, you have probably been in a 'rational discussion' with someone which degenerated into a slanging match. When our emotions are

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

aroused, it is all too easy to stop listening to the person we are arguing with and to start trading insults rather than reasons. Rationalisations When we are in the grip of strong emotions, we tend not to reason in an objective way but to rationalise our pre-existing prejudices. To clarify the difference between reasons and rationalisations, consider the following story by Aesop (sixth century BCE?), the legendary writer of Greek fables. A famished fox saw some clusters of ripe black grapes hanging from a trellised vine. She resorted to all her tricks to get at them, but wearied herself in vain, for she could not reach them. At last she turned away, hiding her disappointment and saying: 'The grapes are sour, and not ripe as I thought.' This story suggests that if we have a particular emotional attitude about something, we may manufacture bad reasons in order to justify it. According to psychologist, this kind of behaviour is quite common. We tend to rationalise when there is a conflict between two or more of our beliefs. For example, a cigarette smoker who is familiar with the evidence that smoking is bad for her health may try to explain away the evidence as follows: At the limit, the tendency to rationalise can lead a person to develop an illusory but self-confirming belief system. The diagram below shows how this can happen. To illustrate, imagine that Henry has an emotional prejudice against immigrants. His prejudice will probably lead to the following:

- 1 Biased perception He notices only lazy immigrants and overlooks hardworking ones.
- 2 Fallacious reasoning He makes hasty generalisations from his own limited experience.
- 3 Emotive language He concludes that immigrants are 'bone idle' and 'don't know the meaning of hard work'.

The above factors will reinforce the original prejudice and make it difficult for Henry to be objective. He can escape from such a vicious circle only if he is willing to question his

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

prejudiced assumptions and actively consider other ways of looking at things. The trouble is that fanatics - by definition - refuse to question their assumptions or consider evidence that runs contrary to their own distorted way of looking at the world. As the psychologist Leon Festinger (1919-90) observed: A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point. We have all experienced the futility of trying to change a strong conviction, especially if the convinced person has some investment in his belief. We are familiar with the variety of ingenious defenses with which people protect their convictions, managing to keep them unscathed through the most devastating attacks.

**Irrational behaviour** Our emotions can not only distort our beliefs, but also lead us to make poor decisions. Some emotions are urgent and short sighted and they can easily blind us to the longer-term consequences of our actions. How often have you said something in a moment of anger that you immediately regretted? Or given in to temptation when it would have been better to exercise self-control? Aristotle defined man as a rational animal, and economics is based on the assumption that we are all producers and consumers alike - rational people. But the underlying reality may be more in line with Thomas Schelling's (1921) amusing description: How should we conceptualize this rational consumer whom all of us know and who some of us are, who in self-disgust grinds his cigarettes down the disposal swearing that this time he means never again to risk orphaning his children with lung cancer and is on the street three hours later looking for a store that's still open to buy cigarettes; who eats a high calorie lunch knowing that he will regret it, does regret it, cannot understand how he lost control, resolves to

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

compensate with a low-calorie dinner, eats a high-calorie dinner knowing he will regret it, and does regret it; who sits glued to the TV knowing that again tomorrow he'll wake early in a cold sweat unprepared for that morning meeting on which so much of his career depends. As this suggests, we are all masters of acting against our own best interests and making resolutions that we break at the first sign of temptation. ('I can resist everything except temptation', Oscar Wilde wryly observed.) We will have more to say about weakness of the will when we look at ethics in Chapter 12. Since turbulent emotions can distort our ability to think clearly and behave intelligently, you might think that the ideal situation would be one in which we did not have any emotions at all and could look at the world in a balanced and objective way. In ancient times, such a belief was held by a group of philosophers known as the Stoics. The Stoics advocated a state of mind called apathy - literally 'without passion' - in which the mind could mirror reality in a calm and untroubled way. Emotions as a source of knowledge Despite the Stoic ideal, it is difficult to imagine a meaningful human life without any emotions. If you describe someone as being 'cold and unemotional', you do not literally mean that they have no emotions, but that they have few emotions compared with the average person. You might think that Mr Spock, the half-human, half-Vulcan character in the original Star Trek series, comes close to having no emotions. But, as Steven Pinker has pointed out, Spock is not so much lacking in emotions as in control of his emotions. Spock's emotionlessness really just amounted to his being in control, not losing his head, coolly voicing unpleasant truths, and so on. He must have been driven by some motives or goals. Something must have kept Spock from spending his days calculating pi to a quadrillion digits or memorizing the Manhattan

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

telephone directory. Something must have impelled him to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new civilizations, and to boldly go where no man had gone before. Presumably it was intellectual curiosity, a drive to set and solve problems, and solidarity, with allies - emotions all. And what would Spock have done when faced with a predator or an invading Klingon? Do a headstand? Prove the four-color map theorem? Presumably a part of his brain quickly mobilized his faculties to scope out how to flee and to take steps to avoid the vulnerable predicament in the future. That is, he had fear. Spock may not have been impulsive or demonstrative, but he must have had drives that impelled him to deploy his intellect in pursuit of certain goals rather than others. Some recent studies of brain-damaged patients in fact suggest that if you did not have any emotions then your life would quickly disintegrate. The psychologist Antonio Damasio cites the case of a patient called Elliot who suffered damage to the emotional centres of his brain. Elliot appeared normal in many respects and performed just as well on IQ tests as he did before his accident. Nevertheless, he became a 'rational fool' whose life fell apart because he had lost the ability to make decisions. Damasio speculates that emotions help us to make rational decisions about things by narrowing down our options so that we can choose between a manageable number of them. Since patients such as Elliot do not have any emotions to guide them, they try to decide what to do on the basis of reason alone and end up experiencing a kind of mental paralysis. The relation between reason and emotion The above discussion suggests that although we tend to think of reason and emotion as two different things, in practice they are closely related to one another and it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them. Rather than think of reason and emotion as completely different

either-or things, it probably makes more sense to say that there is a more-or-less continuum of mental activity running from the very rational to the very emotional. When you are engrossed in a mathematics problem you are at one end of the continuum, and when you lose your temper you are at the other end. Most of the time you are probably somewhere in the middle and have a mixture of thoughts and feelings floating around in your mind. Furthermore, rather than think of reason and emotion as being opposed to one another, it may make more sense to say that our emotions can themselves be more or less rational. When we discussed the nature of the emotions, we saw that they have a mental as well as a physical aspect, and that a change in our beliefs can lead to a change in the corresponding emotion. While it might be reasonable to fear a snake in the cellar, if you later discover that it is in fact a coiled rope then your fear is no longer justified. Similarly, if you are angry with someone because they insulted you and you later find out that you misunderstood what they said, then your anger should disappear. With these examples in mind, we might say that in general an emotion that is sensitive to the real nature of a situation is more rational than one that is not. The philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), was one of the first to suggest that emotions can be more rational or less rational. In speaking of anger, he observed that: Anyone can be angry - that is easy. But to be angry, with the right person to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way - that is not easy. To get a sense of what Aristotle meant by this, compare the following two imaginary scenarios: 1 Paul has arranged to meet Tom at 3: 00 p. m. Tom arrives at 3: 02 p. m. and apologises for being late. Rather than accept Tom's apology, Paul starts screaming and shouting about Tom's lack of consideration and

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

completely loses his self-control. 2 The hospital phones Judy with some terrible news. Her boyfriend has been assaulted by some hooligans and is lying unconscious in the intensive care unit. 'Oh dear', she says, 'that is annoying! I was hoping to play tennis this afternoon, but I suppose I had better come and visit him.' The reactions of Paul and Judy in the above scenarios could both be described as irrational. Paul's problem is that he shows too much emotion, Judy's that she shows too little. If a friend arrives two minutes late for an appointment, you might reasonably show mild annoyance, but it is inappropriate to lose your temper. On the other hand, if you only show mild annoyance on learning that a loved one has been assaulted, then there is surely something wrong with your emotional responses; in this situation, you surely ought to feel shock, concern and anger. This suggests that showing too little emotion is as irrational as showing too much emotion. We need to find a balance between the two. Allowing that our emotions may be more or less rational, there is still a problem that we may be able to see that a particular emotion is irrational and yet find it difficult to change it. This is particularly true with strong emotions such as fear and disgust. You may, for example, know that grass snakes are harmless, or that it is statistically safer to fly than to drive, but you may still be unable to contain your fear when you encounter a grass snake or are sitting in a plane. Many people also find it difficult to override unjustified feelings of disgust, as is shown by the following bizarre experiment. When subjects were invited to eat fudge that had been shaped to resemble dog poop, or drink apple juice poured out of a brand-new bed pall, the vast majority refused - even though such food and drink are usually desirable. We all experience irrational emotions but, since it is difficult to

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>



switch them off, we may find it easier to adjust our beliefs to our emotions than bring our emotions into line with reason. We are back to the problem of rationalisation. When the object of our irrational fear and disgust is, say, an ethnic minority, the consequences can be serious. Intuition For the rest of this chapter we will focus on a particular kind of feeling that is often given as a source of knowledge - namely intuition. Intuitions are, of course, very different from hot emotions, such as love and hate. But since they are usually seen as being more a matter of feeling than of thinking, it makes sense to discuss them here. The word 'intuition' is typically associated with the aha moment of insight when you suddenly see the solution to a problem without going through any conscious process of reasoning. You are probably familiar with the story of Archimedes (c. 287-212 BCE) who hit upon his famous principle while lying in the bath. So excited was he by his insight that he leapt out of his bath and ran naked down the street shouting 'Eureka! Eureka!' ('I've found it! I've found it!'). You may not have run naked down the street, but you have probably had your own moments of insight when the solution to a problem suddenly dawned on you. The change from not being able to solve a problem to suddenly seeing the answer is quite mysterious and no one really understands how intuition works. We use 'intuition' to describe not only flashes of creative insight but also our 'sixth sense' hunches about things. You may, for example, have an intuition that someone behind you is staring at you, and when you turn round you discover you are right! However, such intuitions do not seem to be very reliable. Sometimes when you turn round there is no one there! Given their range and variety, we might distinguish between three different types of intuitions: Core intuitions - our most fundamental intuitions about life, the universe and everything

Subject-specific intuitions - the intuitions we have in various areas of knowledge such as science and ethics  
Social intuitions - our intuitions about other people, what they are like, whether or not they can be trusted, etc.

Core intuitions In an abstract sense, it could be argued that all of our knowledge is based on intuition. For although reason and perception are usually said to give us knowledge, they ultimately depend on intuition.

Reason The laws of logic are the starting point for all our reasoning, but we cannot prove them in terms of any more fundamental laws. If asked to justify them, most people would say that they are intuitively obvious.

Perception Perception is an important source of knowledge, but we cannot be sure on the evidence of our senses alone that life is not a dream. (This is because any evidence we appeal to could itself be part of the dream.) Yet we have an overwhelmingly strong intuition that the dream hypothesis is false and that what we are experiencing is reality. A good way of seeing that our knowledge claims are ultimately based on intuition is to play the Why?

game. Ask a friend to tell you one thing she claims to know, and then ask her why she believes it. When she answers, ask her why she believes that, and so on. The game is usually quite short. Your friend may be able to explain A in terms of B, and B in terms of C, and C in terms of D.... but sooner or later she will run out of reasons and tell you that her final knowledge claim is self-evident or intuitively obvious. We cannot, of course, take such intuitions for granted, but nor can we deny the important role they play in our thinking.

There is a school of thought called romanticism that is associated with the emotions in much the same way that there are schools of thought associated with perception (empiricism) and reason (rationalism). Many people in the romantic movement were literary figures rather than philosophers, but what  
<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

they had in common was an emphasis on the importance of the emotions for making sense of the world. Our discussion of core intuitions could be poetically summarised in Pascal's (1623-62) famous observation that, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing", or John Keats' (1795-1821) claim that, 'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses.' Since many - if not all - of our most fundamental beliefs seem to be based on intuition, romanticism may have something to be said for it. But, before we get carried away singing the praises of hearts and pulses, we ,, should take a reality check. A major objection to the claim that intuition is an important source of knowledge is that different people have conflicting intuitions. Wouldn't it be nice to think that decent, open-minded, well-educated people could all agree about what is intuitively obvious? But we only have to look around us to see that this is not the case. Does the existence of the universe require an explanation? Could a machine think? Could a mind exist without a body? Is abortion murder'? Many people have strong intuitions about the answers to these kinds of questions, but as often as not they disagree with one another! What is obvious to you may not be obvious to me; and we can all too easily be blinded by our own sense of what is blindingly obvious! Here are three general questions that might cast doubt on the value of taking intuition as a source of knowledge: 1 If something is intuitively obvious, must everyone agree about it? (Is there anything that everyone agrees about?) 2 Could you be wrong in thinking that something is intuitively obvious? (Might you one day come to see that what you now think is intuitively obvious is in fact a deeply rooted prejudice?) 3 Whose intuitions should you trust? Are some people's intuitions better than others? Subject-specific intuitions We sometimes appeal to intuition to justify our knowledge

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

claims in various areas of knowledge, but research suggests that such intuitions should be treated with caution. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that our uneducated intuitions in subjects such as logic, mathematics, physics, biology, history, economics and ethics are at best confused and at worst false. The fact that many people get the above questions wrong shows that our natural intuitions are poor guides to the truth. Perhaps this is because they evolved to cope with the stone-age environment rather than with the modern world. At one time, it was believed that knowledge is simply organised common sense. But most psychologists would now say that we need to 'debug' - rather than blindly follow our intuitions. Indeed, it could be argued that the aim of education is to help us 'unlearn' our naive intuitions so that we can acquire a more sophisticated and reliable understanding of the world. To show why we need to be cautious about trusting our natural intuitions, let us briefly consider three subject areas: physics, biology and ethics. Physics According to a common-sense belief that can be traced back to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), objects move only to the extent that they are given impetus or 'oomph', and if no force is applied to them they will grind to a halt. If something is going to move, you've got to push it, and if you stop pushing, it will stop moving. This reflects our everyday experience of the world, and for many centuries it struck people as intuitively obvious. However, this belief turns out to be false. For according to Newton's first law of motion, 'Every object continues in its state of rest or uniform motion unless acted upon by a force.' Since you learnt this at school, you probably have no difficulty in accepting this law as true, but it is worth noticing that it is far from obvious and is in many respects counter-intuitive. After all, when did you last see an object

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

continuing endlessly in a state of uniform motion? There are many other examples of the gap between the physicists' description of the world and our common-sense description of it. For example, as we saw in Chapter 4 (page 100), the desk I am sitting at strikes me as an obstinately solid object, but according to the physicists it consists mainly of empty space. And it gets worse. Many of the mainstream ideas of modern physics - such as quantum mechanics - are so contrary to our ordinary ways of thinking that even physicists struggle to make sense of them. At this level, our natural intuitions are not so much a guide as an obstacle to understanding. As one physics teacher ruefully observed, 'With each freshman class, I must again face the fact that the human mind was not designed to study physics.' Biology Two hundred years ago, it was intuitively obvious to biologists that everything in nature had a purpose, and that since each species had its own unique essence one species could not evolve into another. Since Darwin, however, there has been a consensus among biologists that nature works blindly with no goal in mind, and that species gradually evolve into other species. Ethics The problem with trusting our moral intuitions is that different people at different times have had different intuitions about what is right and wrong. For example, for many centuries it was 'obvious' that men were superior to women, and that some people were natural slaves; but I imagine that few people would accept such beliefs today. Social intuitions One of the problems with intuition as a source of knowledge is not only that it is fallible, but also that we tend to be over-confident about our own intuitions. This is particularly apparent in the case of social intuitions. We tend to put a lot of trust in our intuitions about other people and we pride ourselves on being good judges of character. (When did you last hear someone admit to being a

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

bad judge of character?) However, the evidence suggests that our intuitions are not as good as we like to think. Can you, for example, tell if someone is lying to you? You probably think you can - that it is written all over the person's face (see Figure 6. 8). But countless experiments have shown that when people try to distinguish true stories from false ones they do no better than they would if they simply guessed at random. Natural and educated intuitions At the beginning of this section, we suggested that there is a sense in which all knowledge is based on intuition, but our subsequent discussion has raised doubts about its reliability. This raises the question of when, if ever, we should trust our intuitions. At this point, I think it is worth making a distinction between natural intuitions on the one hand and educated intuitions on the other. We have seen that our natural intuitions do not always help us to understand the world. Expert intuition is another matter. Think of the way in which a chess grandmaster can survey a chessboard and intuitively see the right move to make. His intuition is the product not only of raw talent but also of a vast mental database of background knowledge. Top-level professionals in areas as varied as biology, brain surgery and baseball have similar intuitions. Many of the great breakthroughs in the history of ideas have come about as a result of flashes of creative intuition. Typically, the person in question has been working doggedly on a problem without any success, only for the solution to hit them like a thunderbolt when they are idly daydreaming or taking a walk - or lying in the bath. (One eminent scientist even confessed to having his eureka moment of insight while sitting on the toilet!) The French mathematician Henri Poincare (1854-1912) described how he came to one of his great intuitions as follows: For fifteen days I strove to prove that there could not be any functions like those that I

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

have since called Fuchsian functions. I was then very ignorant; every day I seated myself at my work table, stayed an hour or two, tried a great number of combinations and reached no results. One evening, contrary to my custom, I drank black coffee and could not sleep. Ideas rose in crowds; I felt them collide until pairs interlocked, so to speak, making a stable combination. By the next morning I had established the existence of a class of Fuchsian functions, those which come from the hypergeometric series; I only had to write out the results, which took but a few hours. In reflecting on his experience, Poincare came to the conclusion that mathematical creativity is not a matter of mechanically following rules to generate endless combinations of symbols, but of having the insight to see which combinations are worth exploring. 'It is', Poincare concluded, 'by logic that we prove, but by intuition that we discover.' In reflecting on the nature of these kinds of intuitions, we should keep in mind that despite appearances they are not a short-cut to knowledge. Some people might be tempted to celebrate intuition as an inexplicable and mysterious source of knowledge out of a kind of laziness. After all, wouldn't it be great if, from time to time, you effortlessly came up with brilliant new insights into the nature of things? Imagine that, like Newton, you are sitting under a tree one day when an apple falls on your head, and - 'pow!'- you suddenly come up with a revolutionary scientific theory! Sadly, it doesn't happen like that! For although the nature of intellectual creativity is still poorly understood, there seem to be at least two necessary conditions for having good ideas: (1) a thorough knowledge of the relevant field; and (2) unusually good powers of concentration. If your creative insights are to be of lasting value, you will have to sweat for them. How reliable is intuition? How reliable, then, is

<https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>

intuition as a source of knowledge? We can, I think, say that expert intuition is generally more reliable than natural intuition. But since most of us will never operate at the rarefied intellectual level of a Newton or a Poincare, we might ask to what extent we should trust our own intuitions. Since good intuitions are not God-given, we need to test them against other sources of knowledge. If your intuitions coincide with reason and experience and other people's intuitions, then it makes more sense to trust them than if they do not. What, then, should you do if your intuitions conflict with another source of knowledge? There is no easy answer to this question. When we make decisions in the real world, such as which of two university offers to accept, reason and intuition may contradict one another. In the end, most people tend to go with their intuitions, but, as our discussion has suggested, we blindly trust them at our peril. Conclusion Our discussion of the emotions in this chapter has, I hope, convinced you of their relevance to the search for knowledge. For not only do they provide the energy that fuels intellectual endeavour, but they also play a central role in our mental lives. Some of our deepest beliefs about the world seem to be as much intuitive matters of the heart as rational matters of the head. So rather than think in terms of an either-or choice between reason and emotion, it might be better to say that a balanced intellectual outlook requires both reason and emotion. At the same time, we need to be aware that the emotions can sometimes be an obstacle to knowledge. For, strong emotions can easily cloud our judgement and tempt us to find bad reasons to justify our pre-existing prejudices; and, despite their value, intuitions do not have any magical authority and cannot always be trusted. So it is worth keeping in mind that having strong convictions about something does not in itself guarantee that it is true. In the <https://assignbuster.com/emotions-as-ways-of-knowing/>



last four chapters, we have seen that all of our knowledge tools are double-edged, and that they can both contribute to our knowledge of the world and be an obstacle to it. Rather than rely on any one way of knowing, we need to test them against one another when trying to establish the truth. The step beyond that is to compare our own opinions with those of other people to see how they stand up in the free market of ideas.

**Key Points** The emotions are relevant to the search for knowledge because they provide us with energy, affect our thinking and are sometimes used to justify our beliefs. The six primary emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust are found in all cultures. The James-Lange theory says that emotions are essentially physical in nature; but they also seem to be influenced by our beliefs. The emotions are sometimes an obstacle to knowledge, and strong emotions can colour our perception, distort our logic and inflame our language. Nevertheless, emotions give meaning and colour to our lives, and studies of brain-damaged patients suggest that without them we would become rational fools'. Rather than think of reason and emotion as opposites, it may make more sense to say that our emotions can themselves be more or less rational. Intuition is an immediate insight into something, and we can distinguish core intuitions, subject-specific intuitions and social intuitions. While there is a sense in which all knowledge is based on intuition, the problem is that people have conflicting intuitions. Our intuitive beliefs about many subjects are not very reliable and it could be argued that one of the aims of education is to debug human intuition. Many intellectual breakthroughs have come about in a flash of intuition; but you have to work hard for such intuitions.

apathy debugging intuition emotional colouring

emotive language empathy intuitions James- Lange theory primary emotions  
rational fool romanticism social emotion stoicism