

RATIONALIST NOSTALGIA: A Critical Response to Ruth Leys' *The Ascent of Affect*



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Introduction

Every academic field benefits from a healthy debate about its presuppositions, key terms, and lines of argument. Affect theory is no different. It needs critique—both from within and without, both friendly and hostile—to sift through working ideas and figure out how to progress by moving on, how to build by clearing away. The writings of Ruth Leys—especially her widely cited article “The Turn to Affect: A Critique” (2011) and its book-length elaboration *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (2017)—have emerged as the focal point for much academic criticism of affect theory. Citing these pieces has become standard procedure by those who want to reject or diminish the value of the study of affect for the humanities.

But the details of Leys' arguments are seldom actually brought into the conversation. Many of Leys' advocates seem to believe that she is holding the line against the unlawful incursion of the sciences into the humanities. Yet Leys' own line of analysis rests heavily on her own interpretation of relevant scientific findings in order to swat down humanistic theories of affect. Leys' work, I argue here, offers a distorted representation of the state of the scientific conversation in psychology of emotion, then awkwardly transposes that ruptured image onto contemporary affect theory in the humanities. In the process, Leys weaves the story of a sector of science that I suspect is almost entirely unknown to most humanities scholars. This has led to near-zero scrutiny, on the part of those citing her, of her tendentious and, in my assessment, conceptually flawed rendition of how emotion science has played out over the past half century.

This essay considers four aspects of Leys' project that reflect mischaracterizations or idiosyncratic interpretations of her scientific sources. First, I consider Leys' commitment not to "genealogy" per se, as her title announces, but to an attempt to adjudicate debates in emotion psychology by referring all of them back to a single book from 1994—Alan Fridlund's *Human Facial Expressions: An Evolutionary View*. The entire field of emotion psychology, in Leys' telling, has mysteriously overlooked this vital contribution in the generation since its publication. (She dedicates the entirety of Chapter 6 of her book to blasting emotion psychology for its neglect of Fridlund's work.) Rather than offering a genealogy, Leys is holding something more like a scientific kangaroo court.

Second, I look at Leys' imprecise engagement with the philosophical debates around "intentionality," which she understands as being broadly about rationality and consciousness, rather than a narrower, technical discussion about the nature of mental processes and their relation to objects. Not only this, Leys has actually mischaracterized Fridlund's position on "intentionality" and overstated the consonance of Fridlund's ideas with her project. Unlike Leys, Fridlund is not interested in "intentional" actions that are accessible to individual consciousness. Third, I consider how Leys' elevation of Fridlund's affinity with Richard Dawkins' gene-level adaptationist view of evolutionary biology further undermines her efforts to carve out a space for human "meaning." All of this is driven, I conclude, by a thoroughgoing nostalgia for an unchallenged liberal rationalism. Leys' project, in this view, is congruent with reactionary formations against other critical perspectives (undying boogeymen like "postmodernism" and "cultural Marxism") that have challenged the mythology of the sovereign, reasoning Subject as the only possible tentpole of a functioning public sphere.

Whig Genealogy

In a 2010 interview, Leys characterizes her approach to the history of science as shaped by Michel Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1984) which calls for an approach to "history" that is no longer history, but "genealogy." For Foucault, the error of history—as method—is to compose the past as a linear narrative leading to the present. The genealogist, by contrast, sees time as a sedimentation of accidents (Foucault 1984, 78). This innovation, which allowed her to move past a "linear, teleological approach to history," inspired Leys' early work on trauma (Leys & Goldman 2010, 657). She identifies Thomas Kuhn as another methodological influence (Leys & Goldman 2010, 656). Kuhn parallels Foucault in his argument against what he calls "Whig history" of science: history told only from the perspective of the winners, the past reconstructed as the long coronation of the present. In the context of the history of science, this leads to Kuhn's gleefully skeptical conclusion that "we may... have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth" (Kuhn 1996, 170).

But Leys' approach in *Ascent of Affect* has an unmistakably Whiggish cast. The combination announced in her book's subtitle—"genealogy and critique"—provides the platform for a hybrid genre in which Leys authorizes herself to write not just a narrative account of the history of emotion psychology, but a running commentary on what she takes to be the conceptual flaws of the field as a whole. Although she presents herself as doing a fashionable "genealogy," the book is really more like hot-wired science, an intellectual incursion that aims to resolve a complicated debate from a perch outside the field. She doesn't just tell the story of emotion science. Leys decides exactly how that story ends.

Or rather, how it should have ended, because the story Leys tells is one of discipline-wide mistakes and missed opportunities. A significant amount of *Ascent* is dedicated to castigating the psychology of emotion for getting everything wrong up to 1994, and then failing to recognize the genius of her champion, Alan Fridlund, who ostensibly solved the problems at the heart of the field with his book *Human Facial Expressions*. "My argument in this book," she concludes in *Ascent's* final sentence, "is that in the field of emotion research there is no intellectually viable alternative to Fridlund's position, whatever the cost may turn out to be to many of the existing 'scientific' studies of emotion" (Leys 2017, 368). Rather than a genealogist, Leys in this book acts as a referee of scientific debates, jumping into the ring to raise Fridlund's glove.

Writing of the psychologist Richard Lazarus, for instance, Leys announces that his “entire picture of appraisal as involving inner cognitions intervening causally between the person and the world... was a mistake, one that led to several dead ends” (Leys 2017, 132). Leys continues in this adjudicatory role in her assessment of mid-twentieth-century psychologist Magda Arnold. “What is important to grasp about [mid-century psychologist Magda] Arnold’s influence,” she contends, “is what she got right about appraisal—and what she got wrong” (Leys 2017, 145). When Fridlund steps on the stage, she praises him as the “one person... who at this juncture made a decisive break with [Paul] Ekman”—her story’s supervillain (230). And yet she has to devote an entire chapter to explaining why Fridlund’s book has *not* had the transformative effect on the field she thinks it should have had in the quarter century since its publication¹: “it has been all too easy for scientists, even those generally supportive of Fridlund’s work,” she laments, “to repeat the very conceptual mistakes that, as he had tried to show, have been inherent in Ekman’s picture of the emotions from the first” (270).

This pattern of not just describing the history of a field, but preferring one tendentious interpretation among others, persists throughout the book. An easy way to trace this plotline is to follow the way Leys chooses the winners and losers of science with adjectives. Fridlund writes a “deeply researched and brilliantly argued book” which is also a “brilliant dissection” of Ekman’s work (230). James Russell, Robin to Fridlund’s Batman, writes a “brilliant critique” (61), which has the added advantage of being “superb”² (16; 264). Meanwhile, those who get the science wrong—like Ekman, Silvan Tomkins, or Antonio Damasio—have views that are “theoretically confused and empirically problematic,” sometimes “cunning” but fundamentally “weak” (378; 263).

I don’t want to suggest that historians of science have to remain agnostic about their subject matter. And I’m not at all ready to commit science history to full-blown Kuhnianism. But this narrativizing is nonetheless emblematic of how vast the distance is between Leys’ method and Kuhn’s call for attention to mutations of thought (rather than a positivist victory parade)—what Foucault would call *genealogy*. It’s not wrong to agree with some scholars more than others, but it’s disingenuous to attempt to resolve a live controversy in a scientific field, then cloak that effort under the sleek mantle of “genealogy.” It disguises the adjudicatory operation at the heart of Leys’ book.

This is even more risky in the case of a field like the psychology of emotion, arguably the most unsettled subfield in psychology, one in which powerful, broad-based schools of thought are locked in ongoing struggles and debates. (See Plamper 2015, 11–12, for discussion.) Perhaps due to the elusive nature of its subject matter, emotion psychology remains a field in flux. James Nikopoulos articulates exactly this concern, pointing out that Leys' stance is "either Team Ekman or Team Fridlund." Emotion science must choose. But why, he continues, "does a complex research agenda involving many investigators working in many fields have to choose between only two options?" (Nikopoulos 2019, 58)

Leys' "genealogy," then, is nothing of the sort. As Elizabeth Wilson notes in a review symposium on *Ascent of Affect*, her book "is much more interested in correction and veracity than it is in the vicissitudes of interpretation" (Wilson 2020, 5). Leys sets herself the task of rigging up a particular stance within the psychology of emotion, then uses this stance to adjudicate the rest of the field. This means Leys is not only doing a Whig history, she's doing a Whig history that papers over a volatile, ongoing debate, offering an abrupt and underdeveloped solution and packaging this solution to her primary audience—humanities scholars—as an inevitability. It's a partisan move, invoking the authority of science to shut down a discussion in the humanistic camp.

Blurred Intentions

Although Leys' 2011 article was laser-focused on affect theory in the humanities (particularly the version of affect theory most clearly indebted to Deleuze, as in the work of Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift, and William Connolly—but with sidetracks to bash Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), *Ascent of Affect* is predominantly about post-World-War-II emotion psychology. The first chapter of the book is devoted to Silvan Tomkins, the American psychologist whose *Affect Imagery Consciousness* tomes were creatively anthologized by Sedgwick and Adam Frank in 1995 as *Shame and Its Sisters*.³

The second is on Paul Ekman, a former student of Tomkins and one of the most famous psychologists alive, best-known for his work on facial expressions. The third and fourth are on Lazarus, another psychologist of Ekman's generation, and his well-known early-1980s debate with Robert Zajonc about the relationship between cognition and emotion.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the story's hero, Alan Fridlund, a former protégé of Ekman's who went rogue and published his 1994 book to challenge the regnant interpretation of Ekman's experiments. Chapter 6 is about the discipline of emotion psychology since Fridlund's book was published. This is where Leys excoriates an entire field for its ongoing failure to recognize Fridlund's achievement. Chapter 7, finally, is the 2011 article, reworked, which returns to the colorful clubhouse that is affect theory in the humanities—Deleuzians, psychoanalysts, queer theorists, media scholars, and other tavern rabble all rubbing elbows, though Leys' focus remains on the Deleuzians plus Sedgwick. The book's epilogue serves as another apologia for Fridlund, followed by two abrupt appendixes for some final score-settling.

The first thing a humanities scholar with some familiarity with affect theory might notice about this book is that it mainly probes the periphery of what we think of as affect theory in the humanities today. As Carolyn Pedwell points out, the bulk of the book is about scholars that most self-identified affect theorists have never even heard of, let alone cited—Ekman, Fridlund, and Lazarus, certainly, but for many, likely Tomkins, as well (Pedwell 2020). Leys justifies spending the bulk of the book on these figures, though, by linking them all to a single, continuous mistake, a mistake that she sees infecting Tomkins' work, seeping into the thought of Ekman and Lazarus, then rearing up in contemporary affect theory in the humanities. For Leys, this mistake is so all-consuming that it organizes entire fields in both the humanities and the sciences. This is the error of “anti-intentionalism.”

In Leys' telling, intentionalism refers to the “idea that emotions are directed at cognitively apprehended objects and are sensitive to ‘reasons’” (Leys 2017, 4). Elsewhere, she further associates intentionality with “meaning” (130) and “motive” (233). For her, “meaning or belief or intention or interpretation” are all synonyms (345). What she calls “anti-intentionalism” is opposed to all these things. It is, for Leys, a shorthand that conveniently indicts all the anti-humanist and non-liberal thought of recent scholarship, work in which the “intact person with his or her intentions and meanings” is disrupted (16).

I'm not convinced by the claim that affect theory is of necessity anti-intentional, and the deliberate blurring of different strands of affect theory is a big part of why *The Ascent of Affect* fails in its stated aims.⁴ Sedgwick, for instance, clearly thinks that, for Tomkins, the cognitive and the affective, far from being radi-

cally disjunct, “involve many kinds of interdependent transformations” (Sedgwick 2003, 115). So, too, Adam Frank and Elizabeth Wilson—arguably the most prominent contemporary experts in Tomkins’ thought, certainly in the humanities—adamantly reject Leys’ position as neglectful of “Tomkins’s insistence on the intimate relation between affect and purpose, meaning, and value as such” (Frank & Wilson 2020, 5). Even more explicitly, Sara Ahmed explicitly identifies her approach to affects as intentionalist (Ahmed 2004b, 7). And Jan Slaby insists that “all affective states in humans are (or essentially involve) intentional feelings” (Slaby 2008, 430).

Rather than getting pulled into a citational food fight, though, I want to dedicate this section to a closer inspection of how Leys understands “intentionality” in the first place.⁵ The debate about “intentionality,” in many ways, *is* Leys’ project in this book. But there’s something seriously askew about the way Leys defines this crucial term. She sees intentionalism as the view that emotions are “sensitive to reasons” or related to “meaning or belief or intention or interpretation.” This picture contains the philosophical definition of intentionalism, but also expands it so far beyond its original domain that it has morphed into an entirely new construct.

Here’s the opening paragraph of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Intentionality”:

In philosophy, intentionality is the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs. To say of an individual’s mental states that they have intentionality is to say that they are mental representations or that they have contents. Furthermore, to the extent that a speaker utters words from some natural language or draws pictures or symbols from a formal language for the purpose of conveying to others the contents of her mental states, these artifacts used by a speaker too have contents or intentionality. ‘Intentionality’ is a philosopher’s word: ever since it was introduced into philosophy by Franz Brentano in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it has been used to refer to the puzzles of representation, all of which lie at the interface between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language (Jacob 2019).

I am quoting this passage in full to show what is *not* in the technical definition of intentionality. *Intentionalism* is an approach that emerged within philosophical and psychological debates about emotion. It names a specific response to a question: *Do feelings necessarily associate with a specific object, or can they be ambient—like moods—arriving without a concrete referent?* Intentionalists adopt the first approach: they think every emotion comes with an object. “Intentional” literally means “object-directed.”

Philosophers see this as a lively but narrow debate around the nature of mental representation. The SEP entry's author warns us that "in its philosophical usage, the meaning of the word 'intentionality' should not be confused with the ordinary meaning of the word 'intention'" (Jacob 2019). Leys stumbles into exactly this error, chunking the concept of intentionality together with a range of other derivations that bear little relationship to its carefully circumscribed philosophical domain. Her definition of intentionality as the "idea that emotions are directed at cognitively apprehended objects *and* are sensitive to 'reasons'" uses the conjunction *and* to attach the technical definition of the term to a far broader set of questions (Leys 2017, 4, emphasis added). The additional registers created by Leys' expanded sense of the word—"meaning or belief or intention or interpretation"—are not part of the intentionality debates in philosophy of emotion (345).

This is broadly destabilizing for Leys' argument. To take just one example, let's look at the vexed concept of "consciousness." Leys takes it as given that intentionalism (taking the pro-intentional side in the intentionality debate) is also about *conscious* "meaning"—subjects being able to reflect on the objects of their feelings and subject them to rational scrutiny. But for philosophers, intentionalism is a broad church stance encompassing a range of positions on the relationship between intentionality and consciousness. The SEP dedicates an entire freestanding article to exploring the many philosophical contenders in this debate (Siewert 2016). Intentionalism is entirely compatible with a philosophical stance that locates some feelings in a *non-conscious* domain—beyond the pale of interpretation or waking access. Intentionalism just means that those feelings, though invisible to consciousness, are still *attached to an object*, rather than being objectless. Similarly, anti-intentionalists might well take the view that all of our feelings are accessible to conscious awareness, only those feelings need not have objects. There's no contradiction in either stance. Failure to acknowledge this diversity is an error on Leys' part, sourced in a misunderstanding of how philosophers have defined this term.

Motivation and Expression

This is Leys' most basic mistake. But the most significant consequences of this error come later. Her ship really runs aground when she affixes intentionality to "motive" (Leys 2017, 238). In essence, Leys grafts our everyday definition of "intention" as "something someone wants to do" onto the technical definition.

To better understand the impact of this on Leys' argument, we need to look more closely at the moment in the 1990s that Leys sees as pivotal for emotion psychology, when an entire field ostensibly failed to see a solution staring it in the face. In Leys' telling, key debates in emotion psychology were decisively resolved with the publication of a single book in 1994, Fridlund's *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*.⁶

One might think, from reading Leys, that Fridlund is a deep thinker of intentionality, a white knight jousting over philosophical turf on every page. But what becomes apparent on reading Fridlund's book is that it is scarcely about intentionality at all, certainly not as philosophers understand it—the question of whether mental phenomena must come along with objects. The word “intentionality” doesn't appear in the index as a standalone entry. There is a single reference corresponding to “Intentionality, displays and,” and “Intention movements” (discussed below) has five entries. That's the extent of Fridlund's attention to any variation of “intention.” This is because Fridlund's real focus is not on accessible mental objects, but on placing emotional expression within a frame of evolutionary fitness. He thinks of “intentionality” as “something done with purpose.” But crucially, as we'll see, he disavows any sense that these purposes need to be conscious.

The backdrop: for Ekman, Fridlund's former mentor, our facial expressions are either sincere or deceitful. Sometimes we smile because we're happy. Sometimes we smile because we want people to think we're happy. But deceiving others with our face doesn't always succeed. We can be caught in a lie because our false face cannot fully contain our emotions, revealing a smile or a grimace that contradicts the emotional content of our deception. This is the source of Ekman's famous concept of “microexpressions”—brief flickers on the face that seep out from under our mask and betray our real feelings. A network television show, *Lie to Me*, was based on Ekman's research (and featured an Ekman-like character played by Tim Roth). The careful observation of microexpressions to detect lies was a recurring theme of the show.

Fridlund's break with Ekman's stance leads him to a radically different model of facial expressions. He insists that faces have *evolved to communicate effectively* in all situations. And they do so strategically. Every expression is motivated and does what it intends to do. All of them. No cracks, no mistakes. He writes:

All parts of our brains are equally evolved and act in coordinated fashion to promote our survival amid the social matrix into which we are born. Facial displays have meanings in the social context of their issuance, and they reflect not any 'true' self or hermetic emotions [slipping out involuntarily] but one's motives within a specific context of interaction (Fridlund 1994, 294).

Leys summarizes the contours of Fridlund's position like this: "humans and non-human animals produce facial behaviors or displays when it is strategically advantageous for them to do so and not at other times" (Leys 2017, 128). Our faces, for Fridlund (and Leys?), can never give us away. What looks like a mistake is actually there for a reason. There are no microexpressions, no Freudian slips, no tells. In other words, all facial expressions are "intentional" in the sense that they transparently express a "motive."

For the moment, let's step back from the psychological debate about whether facial expressions can ever reveal an emotional truth we are trying to conceal. What is immediately apparent is that this use of intention is not the same as "intentionality" in the technical, philosophical sense. It's true that Fridlund is interested in the study of "intention movements"—a phenomenon observed by psychologists and zoologists defined as "incipient acts we emit just before we act in earnest announc[ing] our intentions," like a clenched fist raised before a punch (Fridlund 1994, 64). And he argues that intention movements are adaptive responses rather than unintended cracks in an attempted deception. We might signal an aggressive intention in advance of an attack to try to, in Fridlund's account, "establish mating priority without a costly fight" (Fridlund 1994, 73f). (I discuss why he does this, and why I think he's wrong, below.)

But in doing this, Fridlund unambiguously differentiates his discussion of intention as "a promise or stated purpose" from the philosophical sense of intention as "the function or 'aboutness' of an act" (61, fn. 1). Most importantly, in his use of this vocabulary, "neither humans nor nonhumans have to *know* what they intend" (ibid., emphasis original).⁷ So the level of "intentionality" is not pinned to a conscious "intact person," but to an organism, assembled from evolutionary imperatives. "Again," he reiterates later, as part of an argument that infants use communicative signals with their caregivers in motivated ways, "my use of 'motive' and 'intention' implies no necessary awareness or volition" (134, fn. 6).

This undercuts Leys' entire argument that Fridlund is arguing for "intentions" qua human meanings that are "sensitive to reasons." "Fridlund's fundamental insight," she presses, "was precisely that, in light of the new ethology, facial displays must be understood as intentional-communicative signals," or "intentional movements serving various social motives" (Leys 2017, 233). But Leys has conflated the philosophical sense of intentionality (*whether a mental event has an associated*

object) and the conventional sense of intentionality (*what we do on purpose because we want something*). Her insistence that Fridlund leads us out of the darkness of “anti-intentionalism” by making the objects of our feelings accessible to “intact persons” is wildly off the mark. Fridlund expressly denies that the “intentions” he’s talking about are, of necessity, in our field of awareness. On the occasion of an accident of vocabulary, Leys combines two scientific/philosophical conversations that are talking past each other. This leads her to misrepresent the way her keystone scientific informant is actually framing his project.

The Adaptationist Fallacy

The flaws in the conceptual foundation of Leys’ project run even deeper, though. This is because the innovation that leads to Fridlund’s breakthrough—which alone, according to Leys, can rescue the psychology of emotion—is set in motion by none other than the evolutionary psychologist Richard Dawkins. Leys breaks with decades of humanistic pushback on sociobiology and blithely accepts Fridlund’s assumption that everything we do must be for the goal of reproductive “fitness” (and hence there can be no accidents of expression) unchanged and unchallenged.

Leys sees Dawkins as making Fridlund’s “intentionalist” revolution possible. As we’ve seen, Fridlund is not actually interested in the question of whether emotions have objects. He’s interested in how organisms do things “on purpose” rather than by mistake. Dawkins is the same. To get here, Leys misrepresents a key feature of Dawkins’ thought, making it seem like he is interested in “intact persons” as the locus of motivation. Leys summarizes Dawkins’ argument in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* as follows: “in order to attain reproductive success, individuals do not act for the good of the group but in their own interests” (Leys 2017, 226). But that’s not what Dawkins says. It’s right there in the title of his book: Dawkins’ argument is that *genes operating beneath the level of the interests of the individual* are selfish.

This is why the first chapter of *The Selfish Gene* is dedicated to accounting for altruism—a treacherous problem for Dawkins’ theory—in terms of gene selfishness. Why do mothers across the animal kingdom sacrifice themselves for their young? Why do monkeys emit alarm sounds in the presence of a predator that risks drawing attention to the vocalizer? Because, Dawkins tells us, “both individual selfishness and individual altruism are explained by the fundamental law [of] *gene selfishness*” (Dawkins 2016, 8). Genes operate for their own good or for the good of their identical copies—which means they will protect conspecifics

or kin to save copies of themselves. Individual organisms are the useful idiots of genes seeking to replicate themselves by any means necessary. If genes think they can make or save more copies of themselves in *other hosts* by sacrificing their *current host*, they'll do so in a heartbeat. Individuals are actually subordinate to the dictatorship of selfish genes, which bring their own agenda to the table.

Claiming Dawkins as a figure who authorizes the intentionality of “intact persons,” as Leys understands it, is fox-in-the-henhouse reasoning. With a straight face, Leys invokes Dawkins, who repeatedly refers to humans as “survival machines” for genes, to rescue the realm of human “meanings.” Fridlund is cozy with Dawkins’ approach precisely because Fridlund is interested in the ways the “intentions” he’s identifying in facial displays *don’t* have to be “known” to the individuals expressing them. They’re evolutionary mechanisms that are driven by *sub-personal* imperatives. “All parts of our brains are equally evolved,” he writes, “and act in coordinated fashion to promote our survival amid the social matrix into which we are born.” (Fridlund 1994, 294) Notice that it is “parts of brains” in this scenario that are exhibiting intentionality, not the “intact person with his or her intentions and meanings” (Leys 2017, 16).

But isn’t Leys half-right in her summary of the Dawkins–Fridlund position? Surely genes direct individuals to behave selfishly often enough? Maybe, but it’s important to underline that gene-selfishness, too, is a contested concept. This opens onto another area where Leys mischaracterizes the complexity of a live scientific debate. Both gene-level selection and individual-level selection stumble into a wider conceptual problem: rigid *adaptationism*.

Leys claims that, on arrival in the mid-1970s, “Dawkins’s selfish gene approach to natural selection immediately transformed the classical view of animal signaling” (Leys 2017, 226). This is a baffling misrepresentation, and I doubt even Dawkins himself would claim such a sweeping victory. Dawkins’ work landed in the midst of an ongoing *debate* within the field of zoology—and evolutionary biology more generally—about the extent to which different features of organisms could be explained with reference to their improvement of an organism’s overall fitness.⁸ But the insistence of Dawkins and his allies on making selfishness the overriding priority of genes was itself a sort of scientific construct. As feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller points out, the selfish gene model presupposes a subject that is “simultaneously autonomous and oppositional” (Keller 1991, 87). The

gene in Dawkins' tableau bears a suspicious resemblance to the selfish, acquisitive, ruthlessly efficient capital-S Subject at the center of the capitalist imagination.

This helps us identify a distinct problem with Dawkins' theory. Organic evolution is not nearly as economical, streamlined, or efficient as Dawkins would have it. As Keller points out, selection operates on *multiple* levels at all times (the gene, yes, but *also* the individual and the group)—not to mention in multiple timescales and on fluctuating ecological landscapes. For this reason, organisms produced by evolution aren't the hyper-efficient specimens adaptationists imagine us to be. In 1978, a few years after *The Selfish Gene* was published, the biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin skewered adaptationism as what they called the "Panglossian paradigm"—the evolutionary equivalent of Voltaire's character of Dr. Pangloss, able to interpret any feature of the world, no matter how unsavory (venereal disease, for instance), as somehow necessary for this, the best of all possible worlds (Gould & Lewontin 1979, 583).

Gould and Lewontin called instead for attention to the strangeness of evolution, to the way organisms emerge as convergences of accidents rather than perfectly sculpted artifacts of natural selection. Take their famous concept of "spandrels," for instance. These are all the evolutionary oddities we observe in organisms that don't seem to fit the picture of ruthlessly efficient natural selection. (Male nipples, tailbones, and appendixes, to give a few common examples.) Maybe these spandrels were once useful, but no longer, or maybe they've been repurposed from some older, now obsolete function. Or perhaps they're side effects of the structural limitations of an organism's body plan. The point is that not every feature of every organism has been sharpened to a fine point. Gould and Lewontin label their approach "pluralism"—open to adaptationist explanations of phenomena, but keeping the possibility of non-adaptationist interpretations live. It's evolution as genealogy—an accumulation of accidents—rather than as Whig history—a machine for producing perfection.

This brings us back to the facial expression debate. Dawkins' controversial adaptationist perspective—interpreting all the different features of an organism as in alignment with a functional *need* exhibited at the level of gene propagation—becomes the core of Fridlund's approach. For Fridlund, organisms *don't make mistakes*. The "selfish gene approach to ethology," Leys explains, "stressed the idea that from the point of view of the individual or gene it would not be beneficial for the signaler to signal his or her intentions at all times" (Leys 2017, 227). This is why Fridlund is interested in "intention movements." Even these involuntary (and, contra Leys, totally unconscious) signals are *beneficial* for the organism (or its genes). As Fridlund writes, involuntary indicators of our inner states that

undermine our survival purposes “would be extinguished early in phylogeny in the service of deception, economy, and privacy.” (Fridlund 1994, 132) No micro-expressions. No cracks in the mask. Organisms are just too good at what they do.

As another adaptationist philosopher has argued, we must treat every feature of a living organism as “a product of a process of *reasoned* design development, a series of *choices* among alternatives, in which the *decisions* reached were those *deemed best* by the designers” (Dennett 1995, 230, emphasis original).⁹ Finely wrought pieces of evolutionary machinery that we are, we couldn’t possibly undermine our own flawlessly calibrated goals. The little premonitions of our desires that we’re unaware of—“intention movements”—are part of a fundamentally adaptive communicative system. Fridlund even goes so far as to suggest that people who have “tells” that make them bad liars are actually helping themselves by allowing possible trading partners to trust them more in the long run (Fridlund 1994, 138). This is the kind of extremist interpretation a strong adaptationist posture inevitably leads to—taking obviously nonbeneficial behaviors and reinterpreting them as adaptive.

These are all hallmarks of adaptationist hypotheses. They’re not *necessarily* wrong, but they are, at best, only one angle of interpretation among many. A pluralist approach would keep open the possibility that an organism may well *unintentionally* send signals in a way that is evolutionarily maladaptive. Unlike rigid adaptationism, it countenances the conclusion that not every feature of an organism can be subsumed into an adaptationist explanatory frame. And that’s the crux of the dispute between Ekman and Fridlund. Are facial expressions perfectly sculpted mechanisms and therefore incapable of self-betrayal (Fridlund), or do they sometimes falter, despite our best efforts to deceive those around us (Ekman)? For all Leys’ bafflement as to why 21st-century psychologists have overlooked Fridlund’s brilliance, she doesn’t seem to consider the possibility that his fundamental framework relies on questionable scientific assumptions.

Rationalist Nostalgia

Whether we’re talking about the debates around intentionalism, emotion, or evolution, the bottom line is that these scientific conversations are complicated. Leys’ method of taking a spread of rambunctious debates and melding them into a single conversation—then self-assuredly insisting that there’s a single solution

to fix them all in one fell swoop—leads to a conceptual train wreck. Any one of these topics opens onto a landscape of serious debate among many viable scientific positions. Leys' insistence that adopting something called "intentionalism" solves every one of these disparate problems gets us nowhere. Neither genealogy nor critique is satisfied.

Leys' focus on emotion psychology, though, hides her fundamental political interest. Beyond referring all challengers to her science back to Fridlund as the final word on emotional display, she's ultimately *not* all that interested in the conceptual intelligibility of these concepts. Her real concern is about the nature of political reason. What keeps Leys up at night is the collapse of a public sphere governed by rational argument.

"[E]nthusiasm for affect theory," she writes at the book's outset, "tends to blind people to the political stakes involved" (Leys 2017, 2). She rejects "Ekman's affect program theory and related ideas" because it "marginalizes the intact person with his or her intentions and meanings" (16). She endorses the literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels's ongoing pushback on "postmodernism" and its "replacement of ideological disagreements, or conflicts over belief and meaning, with differences in our feelings or bodies produces an indifference to political or ethical dispute" (345). Affect theory is just another version, for her, of the great postmodern sabotage of our once-glorious public conversation.

This is why she accuses Jane Bennett of presenting a picture of affect that "makes it hard to imagine what parliamentary debate would look like," since "for Bennett, debate over ideology is irrelevant" (349). Responding to Elizabeth Wilson in the early-2010s *Critical Inquiry* symposium on her original essay, Leys blasts Wilson's book *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, in which "readers are encouraged... to undertake a mode of affective criticism in which 'caring' and 'empathetic' attachment to the objects of inquiry take the place of judgment and critique" (Leys 2012, 889). Making affect central obscures what we should *really* be talking about, for Leys, namely, "whether or not particular beliefs or opinions are true, or even worth taking seriously" (Leys 2017, 346).

So this is what it all boils down to: Leys' criticism of affect theory is, at heart, nothing more than another version of the boilerplate reactionary bristling at "postmodernism" as an affront to capital-R Reason, the dissolution of the "intact person" as the key element of liberal society. Her line of thinking is perfectly in sync with all the swaggering "rationalists" of the public sphere, the Jordan Petersons, Stephen Pinkers, and Richard Dawkinses of the world, who want to stiffen our spines for reasoned debate, which they claim once ruled us (when

was that, exactly?) but which has fallen away. What this company—including Leys—misses is that “rationality” always comes along with its *own* genealogy. We think a certain way because of the weaving lines of history that converge on our moment, our place, our bodies. They refuse the possibility that what seems like neutral reason *to them* is, in fact, a dynamic sedimentation of priorities and valences—including affective valences. It’s the oldest trick in the book: what seems obvious from your perspective ascends to the pantheon as Reason itself; anyone who thinks otherwise is just, well, irrational.

This is why Leys is so eager for “intentionality”—in the psychological sense—to slip over into the completely unrelated question of *rationality*. “[A]dopting Tomkins’s separation of the affects from our cognitions and... treating the affects as nonintentional states,” she writes, “implicitly deflates or eliminates disagreements over ideas in favor of an emphasis on what we feel or who we are, a position that allows concern with affect and identity to trump debates over the rightness or wrongness of what we believe” (Leys 2017, 49). Affect’s “anti-intentionalism,” she thinks, directly ramifies into a faulty public sphere that obliterates any platform for dialogue.

On some level, this is just knee-jerk liberalism, clinging to the fiction of the self-transparent, autonomous, rational subject—the subject adumbrated by Leys’ idiosyncratic definition of “intentionality”—even after this picture of the subject has been challenged by scholars in the humanities (and the sciences) for centuries. But what Leys fundamentally fails to understand is that affect theory, to the extent that the term names a unity, doesn’t *call for* a public sphere oblivious to reason. It is not, by and large, normative. Affect theory diagnoses, names, and studies the public sphere *that we already have*—that we have *always* had, and always will have—because whatever rationality is, it is only one dimension of our embodied life, and so too is the multifarious public sphere unfurling between our bodies. As Pedwell writes, “critical affect scholars have sought to rethink the meaning of key concepts such as ‘feeling’, ‘thought’, and ‘agency’, and to challenge critical theory to think in more relational, processual, and speculative ways” (Pedwell 2020, 5). This doesn’t mean abandoning conversation, argument, and debate. But it does mean recognizing that the pushes and pulls of feeling are always with us, even and especially when what we’re thinking and saying *feels* totally neutral.

Conclusion

My argument here is that Leys' analysis takes a volatile scientific debate and attempts to resolve it from the outside, then repackages that resolution for outsiders to the field as if the debate had already stilled. To appoint oneself as the apostle of the emotion sciences to the humanities and then use that position to hawk an idiosyncratic interpretation of that science isn't just a Whig history; it's a polemic that tries to disguise that it *is* a polemic, a move that is regrettably typical of so many adoptions of the sciences into humanistic conversations.

There are plenty of viable and interesting critiques of affect theory—many created by affect theorists themselves. As far back as 1995, Sedgwick and Frank expressed skepticism that Deleuzian approaches to affect could fully capture the richness of human experience (Sedgwick 2003, 113). Sara Ahmed articulated her own concerns, along similar lines, a few years later. (Ahmed 2004a, 39, en. 4) Lauren Berlant sidesteps Sedgwick's interest in anti-constructionist approaches to affect by emphasizing that, for her, "the evidence suggests a distinction between a structure of affect and what we call that affect when we encounter it" (Berlant 2011, 158). In my own work I have made a point that I think resonates with Leys' concerns, namely, that affect theory needs a better account of how knowledge is clinched by feeling (Schaefer 2017; 2022). There's a whole range of positions in the literature on the relationship between affect and thought, much as there is across the psychology of emotion. I can imagine Leys being sympathetic to many of these viewpoints, yet she cites none of them, preferring to paint a monolithic version of affect theory united by the grand vice of "anti-intentionalism."

Leys needs the intentional approach—intentional in the sense of "on purpose," not in the technical, philosophical sense—because she needs individuals. She sees it as a moral imperative that we have "intact persons"—liberal subjects, autonomous agents, which she presumes are the only viable foundations of a functioning public sphere. This is why she ends up on the same frequency as Dawkins and Fridlund (while still misreading them overall). The supremely selfish Subject with its militarized borders and acquisitive expertise—the scientific construct feminist critics have excavated from the foundations of adaptationist sociobiology, what Sylvia Wynter has astutely identified as the figure of capital-M "Man"—is really the *individual* par excellence. (Wynter 2003) That's the Subject built by Dawkins' selfish genes, at least in the popular misrepresentation of his work that Leys trots out. It is this fortified Subject that Leys wants us to return to, and it is, I have argued, the threat to the ironclad integrity of this Subject presented by affect theory that has prompted her attack.

I know I have been sharply critical of Leys' analysis here. But I want to end on a note of appreciation. Leys' core concern, I believe, must be taken seriously. Affect theory really *does* need to talk about what it means to move beyond the liberal subject. Affect theory, because it pays attention to factors that are only partially present to consciousness, often takes as its form of analysis "*You say that your actions and beliefs are motivated by x, but really they are about y.*" This genre didn't emerge with affect theory. It has been the orientation of critique for 200 years—dialectics (material and otherwise), psychoanalysis, genealogy, post-structuralism, and even (especially) evolutionary psychology, to name a few, have all trafficked in the same analytic maneuver. One of affect theory's innovations is to elevate the semi-opaque dynamic between awareness, motivation, and self to the level of a major motif. Leys has raised an important concern about what happens when we walk away from the sovereign liberal subject in a social, political, and cultural framework in which liberal common sense is a given. Pressing against this fiction has consequences, and scholars working on affect can benefit from Leys' call for a self-reflexive conversation about the politics and ethics of affect as method.

Endnotes

1. A review of the Fourth Edition of the Guilford Handbook of Emotions from 2016 shows that Fridlund is cited frequently, though primarily with reference to his broader theory of how expressions are modulated for strategic purposes, not with reference to the question of intentionality. This is consistent with the interpretation that Fridlund is using the word "intentionality" very differently from the way Leys is, as discussed below.
2. To Leys' credit, she also acknowledges Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a "brilliant literary critic" even as she sets up her disagreements with her.
3. *Ascent of Affect* is, in many ways, an extension and elaboration of earlier criticisms Leys had leveled against Sedgwick on the topic of shame in the form of a sustained attack on Tomkins, who inspired much of Sedgwick's work (Leys 2007).
4. Summarizing Tomkins, Leys writes that in his model "the nervous system is understood to be 'wired directly to the onset of the danger'" (Leys 2017, 83). Note the embedded quotation in that passage. One might assume this quotation is from Tomkins, perhaps offering a statement of his own position. But it's actually a passage from an article by Massumi—an article that does not cite Tomkins, written by an author who has never made use of Tomkins. This is characteristic of how Leys recklessly conflates widely divergent strands of the literature.
5. See Frank & Wilson 2020, Ch. 3, esp. 35-39, for a more detailed rebuttal of Leys' characterization of Tomkins' thought. See also Schaefer 2019.
6. Leys seems to have not only read Fridlund's book, but interviewed him (and only him) in the process of writing *The Ascent of Affect*. Personal communication with him is cited about ten times throughout the book.

7. Leys has noticed this footnote and cites it, but declines to quote Fridlund's explicit assertion that we don't need to "know" what we intend (Leys 2017, 271).

8. See Sterelny 2001 or Schaefer 2015, Ch. 5 for an overview.

9. Dennett calls this position the "intentional stance," but note that his use of this word differs again from both Leys' and Fridlund's respective senses.

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