



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on February 9, 2023

Research Confirms the Stereotype: Liberals Confuse Emotion With Rationality

Liberals are not only more likely than conservatives to suppose that “emotion is a feature of rationality,” a series of three studies has shown, but also apparently believe it *should* be. In fact, they consider emotions more “functional” (utilitarian, essentially) than conservatives do despite reporting less emotional well-being.

The research was published in the journal [Motivation and Emotion](#). Defining “functional” as “beneficial for individuals for adapting to the environment or attaining their goals,” the authors [write in their abstract](#) (summary):

Relying on feelings to guide thoughts and plans may be functional from the perspective of the individual but threaten the cohesion of social groups. Thus, liberals, who prioritize caring and fairness for individuals, may view emotion as more functional than do conservatives, who prioritize preserving social groups, hierarchies, and institutions. To test this, participants in three studies (total N = 1,355) rated political partisanship, beliefs about the functionality of emotion, and well-being.... Across all studies, the more liberal participants were, the more they viewed emotion as functional, despite reporting less emotional well-being.... These results suggest that emotion is viewed as more functional by those who prioritize the needs of individuals, but as less functional by those who prioritize the cohesion of social groups.



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Note that these characterizations of liberals and conservatives are suspect. Consider that liberals don't



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in a blanket sense actually prioritize “the needs of individuals” (while confusing needs with wants); they don’t, for example, care much about the “needs” of those opposing their politically correct agenda. Rather, leftists today try to “cancel” them for the very purpose of achieving “the cohesion of [woke] social groups.” But I digress.

Pointing out that “societies,” including the United States, are increasingly polarized politically, the research paper authors theorize that this may be partially because liberals and conservatives conceptualize emotion’s role differently. Illustrating this divide, they mention conservative memes such as “Facts don’t care about your feelings.” (This sentiment, mind you, was recently expressed in different words even by liberal comedian/commentator Bill Maher. “You can’t change reality by screaming at it,” he recently said, criticizing “woke” priorities.)

As to these differences, compared “to conservatives, liberals are guided more by their current emotions when evaluating political policies ... value empathy more ... and are more emotionally expressive,” write the authors. “Conservatives place greater value on self-control.” Hence the difference between Black Lives Matter protests and the Tea Party demonstrations of some years back.

The authors conclude that their “findings suggest though that liberals view emotion as a feature of rationality while conservatives view it as a bug. Across three studies, liberals viewed emotion as more functional than conservatives — that is, as a healthy source of information about the self that provides direction in life rather than as a weakness and a waste of time.”

So what is the proper conceptualization of emotion? As I [wrote](#) in late December:

It’s as if the intellect is the engine and emotion the fuel. An engine alone is an impressive mechanism with great potential, but without fuel has nothing to animate it, rendering it impotent; fuel alone is powerful and explosive, but without an engine has nothing to channel its power, so it can only be destructive. It’s only when you have both together, each performing its proper role, that the desired effect is achieved.

Literally put, the emotions’ role is to provide the impetus to act (the passion) once the intellect has determined what that action should be.

This relates to something the research paper authors stated. Asserting that our civilization has *traditionally* valued stoicism and discouraged emotionalism, they relate that recent “academic approaches, while acknowledging that emotions are not always helpful, portray emotion as an essential suite of processes that evolved to guide people’s thoughts and plans in a manner that helps them achieve their goals.”

Providing an example, the authors write that “anger directs people’s attention to, and motivates them to overcome, obstacles to their goals.” Precisely. In this case, anger is the *fuel* that “motivates” (moves) them to act on what, if the goal is valid, is a rational aim that would pass intellectual muster. In certain instances, this may even be what we call “righteous anger.”

The authors provide as another example that “[f]ear motivates people to avoid danger.” True, but it can also inhibit people from taking risks necessary to advance the common good or, even, from pursuing beneficial endeavors that don’t in reality pose danger; the latter case is known as *irrational fear*.

We can only know the difference, too, between *rational* and *irrational* fears by applying *rationality* — that which accords with *reason* — which is done via the intellect.



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Apropos to this, animals have emotion; they often exhibit anger, for instance. It may be all they have, and they need it to survive. A mouse will not (apologies to [Mickey](#), [Minnie](#), and [Mighty](#)) see a cat and think, “This is *Felis catus*; he has claws and fangs, is far larger than I, requires sustenance to survive, and is a carnivore. And since I, *Mus musculus*, would provide ideal nutrition for him, I’d be prudent to flee this area posthaste lest he rend me limb from limb.” Animals lack reason; only fear makes the mouse run. (It also would make him flee from from a human who’d actually help him, as a friend’s hamster once did upon getting loose.)

Then also consider that children are more emotional than adults, exhibiting extremes ranging from tantrums to exultant joy, and become better regulated as they move toward and through the [age of reason](#). The point?

Our time’s exaltation of emotion and frequent subordination of reason to it — e.g., the [recent story](#) about how the Washington state Department of Health’s climate curriculum counsels teachers to emphasize “emotions” over “rational thinking” — constitute movement toward a childish or even animalistic state.

And that today’s liberals epitomize this explains why some have likened them to over-sized children, who’ve grown up but not wise, with an age of reason ever lying somewhere beyond the normal lifespan.



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