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What is This?
Ur-Emotions and Your Emotions: Reconceptualizing Basic Emotion

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Abstract

The term ur-emotion is proposed to replace basic emotion as a name for the aspects of emotion that underlie perceived similarities of emotion types across cultures and species. The ur-prefix is borrowed from the German on analogy to similar borrowings in textual criticism and musicology. The proposed term ur-emotion is less likely to be interpreted as referring to the entirety of an emotional state than is the term basic emotion. Ur-emotion avoids reductionism by indicating an abstract underlying structure that accounts for similarities between emotions without implying that the differences are unimportant. This article is dedicated to the memory of Bob Solomon, and is framed in terms of his decades-long analysis and critique of the concept of basic emotions.

Keywords
basic emotion, Robert L. Solomon

The topic of basic emotions is among the most widely debated in contemporary emotion theory. Classic modern statements of the theory include those of Ekman (1977), Izard (1977), Panksepp (1982), and Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987). The classic modern critique of these theories was by Ortony and Turner (1990). The debate continues today, with vigorous new proposals both pro and con (e.g., Feldman Barrett, 2006; Power & Dalgleish, 2008). Yet, in 1976, before any of the aforementioned statements and critiques, Bob Solomon summarized many of the assumptions of basic emotion theory and issued a scathing rejection of the concept.

That prescient analysis appeared in The Passions, Solomon’s first book about emotion (Solomon, 1976). It anticipated future basic-emotion theories by detecting their assumptions and aspirations in the history of western philosophy. And it delivered its ideas like salvos, in a style that is completely unique, even among Solomon’s own writings. “Let me be outrageous” it said on page one, and wonderfully outrageous it was, continuing through page 431 where the concluding sentence called for seeing “the expansive world of surreal possibilities before us—or ‘in us’—which is us,” and then concluded with one final quotation from Bob’s beloved Nietzsche.

The Passions really is like no other book—romantic and existential, counter-cultural and culture-critical, embracing ideas about love and life with a turbocharged zing energized by . . . well, passion. The book’s ideas seem to have been derived from the entirety of human civilization. There was western philosophy, of course: Socrates and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Bedford, Ryle; and then, bearing the book’s real message, the continental phenomenologists and existentialists: Husserl, Nietzsche, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the rest. But there was eastern philosophy, too, and other disciplines as well: psychology, sociology, history, theology. And the arts were accorded equal place: literature and music, painting and drama, culture high and culture low. The book’s sentences caromed from Goethe and Gide to Shakespeare and Camus, from Edgar Rice Burroughs and Arthur Conan Doyle to Carlos Castañeda and Erica Jong. The pages resonated with Wagner overtures and Beethoven symphonies, evoked images from Goya and Delacroix. The book introduced many of the topics and arguments that Solomon continued to develop throughout his career.

Basic emotion was one of those topics, and it became a favorite target. Solomon repeatedly waged battle against it much as he did against passivity, feelings, valence, and the false dichotomy between passion and reason. His writings on the subject span four decades—his last book, True to Our Feelings (Solomon, 2007), discussed basic emotions extensively.

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Solomon continuously adjusted his arguments to accommodate the latest theory and research, but he never wavered in his opposition to basic emotion’s conceptual premises and pragmatic effects.

In this article, I would like to honor Bob Solomon in two ways. The first is to review the topic of basic emotions in light of Bob’s objections and to offer a small contribution to the debate. The second is to emulate Bob’s eclecticism a bit by drawing upon ideas from research on literature and the arts as well as from philosophy and my own field of psychology. I will propose a new term to replace basic emotion and will elaborate its meaning by drawing analogies to similar terminology in the German lexicon, in literary textual criticism, and in music analysis. I propose that this term, ur-emotion, can avoid some of the problems that Solomon identified with basic emotion and thereby promote conceptual clarity.

**Solomon’s Critique of Basic Emotions**

In his first book, Solomon identified the historical antecedents of modern basic emotion theory. As he put it, “the quest for the ‘basic’ emotions is one of the oldest games in psychology” (Solomon, 1976, p. 281). And indeed it is. The history of this game extends back to Plato and Aristotle, each of whom listed emotions and discussed underlying typologies, albeit rather haphazardly. The game continued to be played, with increasing sophistication, by the Stoics, by medieval philosophers (especially Thomas Aquinas), and by the early modern philosophers.

The first systematic scheme was developed by the early Stoics and described by Diogenes Laertius, Pseudo-Andronicus, Stobaeus, and Cicero. It postulated four generic passions—pleasure, distress, desire, and fear—each of which subsumed numerous specific passions. The generic passions formed a $2 \times 2$ classification scheme based on their being differentially directed at something that is thought to be either good or bad and that is either in the present or in the future. Thomas Aquinas accorded basic status to a greater number of passions; his were love, hatred, desire, aversion, hope, fear, despair, courage, joy, sorrow, and anger. Like the Stoics, however, Aquinas provided not merely a list but also a structure, and his was based on an intricate analysis of desirability, movement versus rest, and the difficulty of attainment or avoidance. The early modern philosophers rejected or modified these earlier systems and introduced a variety of new and competing approaches. René Descartes postulated six primary passions (love, hatred, joy, sadness, wonder, and desire) and explained how their variations and combinations could yield new emotions. Thomas Hobbes listed seven simple passions (appetite, desire, love, aversion, contempt, joy, and grief), although only two, appetite and aversion, really received the status of being primary or basic. Baruch Spinoza derived all the passions from just three principal ones—desire, delight, and displeasure—that provided the basic capability to register success or failure in the striving for self-preservation. (For modern exegesis, see Dixon, 2003; James, 1997; Knuttila, 2004; Sorabji, 2000.)

In *The Passions*, Solomon explained why he disliked the quest for basic emotions. Focusing on a small number of general categories elides the rich variety of the human emotional palette. Treating basic emotions as atoms that combine to form complex emotions reduces their dynamic complexity to a static essence. Lists of basic emotions smack of ethnocentrism by focusing on “the most common and admissible structures that we single out as representative of our surreality” (p. 281, italics in original). Solomon interpreted the standard lists of basic emotions as reflecting the peculiar obsessions of bourgeois western culture: individualism, prosperity, status consciousness, introspection, negativity, psychological defensiveness. And finally, in the context of that first book’s dazzling bravura, Solomon simply had no patience for anything that seemed so pedestrian, unromantic, and anal-compulsive as an official list of the certifiably basic: “These are librarian’s questions, based upon our obsession for atomism, classification, and bureaucracy” (pp. 280–281). Instead, Solomon proposed a more open-ended framework capable of registering the scope and subtlety of human emotional potential. In *The Passions* he characterized emotions in terms of a structuralist framework, in the manner of Lévi-Strauss. A matrix of 13 aspects—including status, responsibility, inter-subjectivity, type of object, direction, and evaluation—allowed for over a thousand permutations, only some of which would be recognized by any one culture, but none of which could be declared more basic than any other.

Solomon remained engaged with the topic of basic emotions over the next three decades, elaborating his arguments while keeping abreast of the rapid developments that were occurring as multiple disciplines became engaged in emotion research. At first he focused on ways that culture influences emotions, and in a series of articles he elaborated the cross-cultural variability of emotions. One early article assessed the pernicious effects of the James-Lange theory of emotion on anthropology (Solomon, 1984). By emphasizing feelings, Jamesian theory excluded emotions from anthropologists’ methodology, and by emphasizing physiology it encouraged the conclusion that emotions are part of a universal human nature. Other articles related cultural variability in emotions to ethics. Love, perhaps the emotion Solomon analyzed most, provided one vehicle with which to explore how cultural and historical variation in the ethical valuation of an emotion could modify the function that the emotion played in a particular society (Solomon, 1988). Sympathy and vengeance provided others (Solomon, 1994).

Solomon’s two most fully-developed analyses of basic emotion were written in response to the explosion of research on emotion that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. The first was a response to a book of articles about Asian approaches to emotion (Solomon, 1995). Paradoxically, that book led Solomon to appreciate the appeal of universalism and the limits of social constructionism. He reflected on what cultures have in common, and concluded that they shared not only biology but also the human condition, the life circumstances that humans all over the planet tend to share. Together, these commonalities suggested that some emotions were very likely to arise under any imaginable circumstances; fear, frustration, and desire were his examples. Yet the point of the exercise was not to identify basic emotions but to demonstrate how few could be identified without considering a
person’s particular cultural circumstances and developmental history. The structure of the human brain does not establish basic emotions because the brain’s own plasticity enables emotional variability. Solomon’s position was that easy answers are impossible, doctrinaire opinions unhelpful, and empirical investigation necessary on a case-by-case basis.

Solomon’s definitive analysis was entitled “Back to Basics: On the Very Idea of ‘Basic Emotions’” (Solomon, 2003). It was his only article devoted exclusively to basic emotions, and he worked on it over the course of a decade. It was initially drafted in 1993, in reaction to the vigorous debate occurring in psychology at that time, but it was not published until Solomon had revised it to incorporate subsequent developments in philosophy (especially Griffiths, 1997, and Goldie, 2000). Solomon characterized the modern psychological theories of basic emotions as arising out of a scientific tradition that was biological and value-neutral. These theories equated basic emotions with hypothetical packages of automated responses involving the autonomic nervous system, the endocrine system, facial and vocal expression, and behavior. Solomon concluded that these theories promoted a reductionism that oversimplifies emotions, both conceptually and practically. Conceptually they underplayed the importance of cognition and socio-cultural context while misrepresenting the biological elements as fixed rather than as modifiable in the course of development and enculturation. Pragmatically, they focused researchers’ attention on the simplest emotions, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of emotions as primitive and unsophisticated.

It was this reductionism that Solomon (2003) most disliked. He considered the essence of reductionism to be the assertion that human and animal emotions were “nothing but” their simplest components and lowest common denominators—“‘nothing-but’ery,” he called it (p. 130). “‘Nothing-but’ery’” led to the denial or neglect of what Solomon regarded as the most interesting and important aspects of emotions. He argued that basic emotions, so defined, were not emotions at all: “there is good reason to suppose that we have never met a raw, unembellished, basic emotion, one not ‘covered over’ with the trappings of culture and experience” (p. 118). Solomon proposed that the term basic could be applied to realms other than biology; he demonstrated how entirely different sets of basic emotions could be selected based on their importance to a particular society, to ethics, or to human well-being.

Nevertheless, Solomon had deep appreciation for the contributions of the researchers who advocated for basic emotions. He understood what inspired intuitions about emotional universals, and he admired the research that led to discoveries about emotion’s neurology, expression, and adaptive functions. For those reasons, it now seems worthwhile to rehabilitate the concept of basic emotion to avoid its problems but retain its attractions. In the remainder of this article I want to explore one way of doing so. Most critiques of basic emotions focus on what is basic about them, but Solomon’s writings raise another issue: what is emotional about them? That is, in what sense do basic emotions actually occur? Like Solomon, I believe they do not occur in “raw, unembellished” form. But in what sense can basic emotions be said to exist within embellished forms? I contend that the concept of a basic emotion must be understood as being more abstract than are concepts of emotions that occur in a particular species or human culture.

### Basic Emotions as Abstractions

My central contention is that basic emotions do exist in an abstract sense even though they cannot be equated to any actual, occurring emotional states. This contention requires some explaining. There is a natural, but mistaken, way of understanding the term basic emotion as referring to a type of concrete emotional state. In this sense, basic emotion suggests that there are two types of emotion, basic and nonbasic, both of which are actual emotions that people or animals can experience in the same sense. It is in this sense that Solomon’s statement that “we have never met a raw, unembellished, basic emotion” seems exactly right. Basic emotions, in this concrete sense, do not exist.

Apparently, many basic emotion theorists do not intend to refer to anything so concrete. Evidence for this intention will be presented later, but for now the point is that the term basic emotion is nevertheless frequently interpreted as having a concrete meaning. I contend that one likely reason is the term basic emotion itself—it sounds concrete. Basic emotion theorists are the victims of their own terminology. At least that is what I want to propose. If I am correct, it is in everyone’s best interest to change the terminology, but to justify that solution I must first more persuasively diagnose the problem.

The term basic emotion is used in many ways. Ortony and Turner (1990) demonstrated that most meanings can be placed into one of three general categories. One category focuses on special biological properties, such as genetic determination, universality across human cultures or across mammalian species, association with activity of specific brain structures, or evolution to serve particular adaptive functions. A second sense of basic emotion entails being irreducible into components that are themselves emotions. In this sense, a basic emotion is not itself constituted from other emotions, whereas a nonbasic emotion is composed of basic emotions and other elements. A third proposal is that basic emotions correspond to categories that have the properties ascribed to the basic level of categorization. The first category of theories, the biological one, is more prevalent among the modern theories (Ekman, 1994), but the second continues to have advocates and was more common in previous eras. The third meaning, strictly speaking, pertains more to emotion concepts than to emotions per se, but I will argue that that many basic emotion theories are in fact intended as superordinate categories of emotion.

In all three cases, there are good reasons to consider the meaning of basic emotion to be rather abstract. One reason, of course, is empirical: any theory that posits that a basic emotion can be defined by a specific bundle of biological properties runs into trouble with the fact that there is very little evidence for such bundles (Feldman Barrett, 2006; Reisizen, 2000). But the basic emotion theorists themselves often seem to mean something...
more abstract by the term basic emotion. As demonstration, consider several representatives of each of the three major senses of basic emotion.

One example of the biological meaning of basic emotion is the theory of Panksepp (1982, 1992). Although Panksepp (1992) equates basic emotions with certain brain systems, he states that “human affective experience ultimately emerges from ancient neurosymbolic systems of the mammalian brain” (p. 559). He does not say that emotions consist only of the activity of the specified brain systems, but rather that these brain systems (basic emotions) somehow contribute to actual emotions. He states that social constructionist approaches “can provide schemata of how the genetically endowed systems develop their full resolution by interacting with the vast complexity of the real world” (p. 559). His position sounds quite compatible with the assertion that basic emotions per se do not actually occur.

As a second example, consider Ekman’s (1992) concept of basic emotions, which emphasizes cross-cultural universality, evolutionary adaptiveness, and a set of defining features that includes distinctive signals, distinctive physiology, and presence in other primates. Yet even such concrete features are presented as characterizing something more abstract. Ekman stipulates that “each of the basic emotions is not a single affective state but a family of related states” (p. 172, italics in original). Furthermore, he describes a basic emotion not as a fixed pattern but as “a theme and variations” (p. 173, italics in original). A basic emotion, therefore, is not a concrete thing but rather a more abstract theme that must be inferred from underlying variations.

A third example of a modern basic emotion theory is that of Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987). These theorists postulate five basic emotions that occur universally in humans and evolved as biological solutions to the problem of transitioning from one plan to another. Oatley and Johnson-Laird understand basic emotions as involving innate components, as being linked to neurophysiology, and as being shared with nonhuman mammals. Yet these theorists conceive basic emotions as merely the incomplete beginnings of full-fledged adult emotions. “Basic emotions,” they write, “are inchoate; by adulthood they have been given substance and expression by culture” (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000, p. 472). So in their view, basic emotions do not generally occur in a pure form.

I do not intend to claim that biologically-oriented basic emotion theories entirely avoid claiming that basic emotions occur in pure form. In fact, the writings of Panksepp, Ekman, and Oatley and Johnson-Laird do contain passages that suggest a fairly concrete biological essentialism, and those passages have been amply discussed in the debate about basic emotions. Nevertheless, the passages described above demonstrate that all three theories acknowledge that a basic emotion can be interpreted as referring only to a part, theme, or underlying aspect of an occurring emotional state. Thus, the first meaning of basic emotion—as involving special biological properties—can be interpreted as referring to something that never literally occurs alone.

Consider next the meaning of basic emotion that involves the basic level of categorization. This meaning is quite different from the first one, but it too is properly understood as an abstraction. A well-known example of the basic level of categorization may be found in research on folk knowledge of emotion concepts (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987). Shaver and colleagues used agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis to reveal the categorical representations implicit in the pairwise similarity ratings of 135 English emotion words. The clusters were analyzed at each iteration of the stepwise algorithm to determine which level of abstraction best exhibited the characteristics of the basic level of categorization: within-category similarity, between-category contrast, and cognitive efficiency due to a minimal number of categories. These criteria were found to be optimized at the point where six clusters remained, although, because one of the clusters was very small, the basic level is best considered to consist of five large clusters containing a total of 132 emotion words.

Because each of these five clusters contains many emotion words, each basic-level concept must be fairly abstract. That fact may not be widely appreciated, however, due to the way that the researchers chose to label the basic-level categories. They decided to name each basic-level cluster by choosing one of the words within the cluster, so they named the basic-level categories love, joy, anger, sadness, and fear. That decision invites confusion and misinterpretation because it requires each of these five words to have two meanings. For example, the cluster named anger contains 29 words, including irritation, frustration, disgust, jealousy, torment, and vengeance, as well as the chosen category label anger. Anger (the basic-level category label) refers to this entire category, whereas anger (the specific emotion word) refers to one of the 29 types of basic-level “anger.” The abstract nature of the basic-level categories would have been clearer, I believe, if the authors had instead given the basic-level category a label that better indicated the range of emotions within, such as hostility-related emotions. Providing such a label would clearly suggest the abstract concept corresponding to the basic-level category. A more suitable set of basic-level labels would therefore have been something like this: affection-related emotions, happiness-related emotions, hostility-related emotions, sadness-related emotions, and fear-related emotions.

As an aside, I must acknowledge that my recommendation about category labeling appears to contradict one of best-established facts about the basic level of categorization, namely, that basic-level categories tend to have short, single-word names. Without getting unduly sidetracked by this issue, I would propose that common emotions words such as anger probably have both a broad meaning and a narrow meaning; the broad meaning corresponds to a basic-level category, has a meaning akin to “hostility-related” or “anger-like,” and permits sentences such as “Don’t make the bear angry”; the narrow meaning contrasts with most other members of its basic-level category (such as torment, envy, and disgust) and permits sentences such as “Anger is a desire, accompanied by pain, for conspicuous revenge, on account of an unjustified slight toward oneself or one’s friends”). Children certainly start out with very broad meanings, and adults primarily rely on a small set of general emotion words (Widen & Russell, 2008). It may be that the more precise meanings of love, joy, anger, sadness, and fear are more salient to experts than to novices. So if, I might be justified in my paradoxical recommendation that basic-level categories be labeled
with verbose phrases rather than with common short words—if the goal is not to confuse emotion experts!

The point, though, is that basic-level emotion categories actually do have something in common with biologically-defined basic emotions. Both are, in fact, quite abstract. And, just as biologically-defined basic emotions do not occur in their pure form, so too are emotional states not classifiable into a basic-level category without also being classifiable into a more specific emotion category. (An interesting debate about whether moods conform to this claim must await another occasion.)

Modern theories of basic-level categories are not the only examples of the basic-level-category sense of basic emotions. All of the older, philosophical basic-emotion theories, from the ancients to the early moderns, can be considered to be of this type as well, because they have more to do with classification than with identifying biological substrates or with combinatorial building blocks. The Stoics’ $2 \times 2$ classification scheme postulated four generic passions that, like abstract categories, subsumed numerous specific passions. The concept of a generic passion is rather similar to that of a basic-level category. Aquinas’s system similarly classified specific passions into 11 categories defined by the presence of abstract features. Descartes’ six primary passions, even though they could combine to form new emotional blends and sequences, mostly served as categories of which most of the nonprimary passions were subtypes. Hobbes and Spinoza also defined nonbasic passions as more specific variants of the basic types.

The remaining meaning of basic emotion concerns irreducibility: basic means irreducible but capable of serving as a component of complex, nonbasic emotions. In theory, this concept need not be abstract, but in practice it tends to accompany one of the other two meanings that have already been shown to permit an abstract interpretation. Ekman (1992), for example, describes basic emotions as forming more complex emotions; examples would be emotional plots (such as grief) and emotional blends (such as scorn). Descartes and Spinoza also described how their basic passions could be combined to form other passions.

Thus, each of the three types of basic emotion theory can be interpreted as referring to aspects of occurring emotional states, not to the entirety of occurring emotional states. One reason why this conclusion needs to be justified at all is that the term basic emotion sounds like a species of emotion rather than like an aspect of emotion. For this reason, a strategy for rehabilitating the concept of basic emotion may require changing its name. I will propose ur-emotion.

Ur-Emotions

Despite the many problems with the concept of basic emotion, there remain reasons for its appeal. Cross-cultural differences in emotion do not seem absolute; empathy with the emotions of other species seems compelling; neurological similarities across species are considerable (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000; Solomon, 2003). The underlying intuition is that something significant is shared, that some commonality reaches across the differences between cultures and species. But the term basic emotion doesn’t fairly capture that intuition, due to unwanted connotations of both “basic” and “emotion.” So what label captures this intuition about underlying commonalities?

I propose ur-emotion. This admittedly odd term borrows its prefix from German, where ur- can have precisely the meaning that’s needed to replace basic. To elucidate this meaning, I will briefly describe three examples which use the prefix ur-. One is the German lexicon. Another is textual criticism of William Shakespeare’s Hamlet. And the third is the system of music analysis developed by Heinrich Schenker.

The Ur-Prefix in German

In German, the prefix ur- can mean underlying, preliminary, or archetypal. The German word Bild means picture, image, or idea; urbild means model or prototype. The word form means shape or mold; urform means archetype. Gewalt means power or control; urgewalt means elemental force. Sache means thing or object; ursache means reason or cause.

To be sure, the ur-prefix does not always have precisely this meaning in German, but the other meanings are related and occupy a region of semantic space that is well-suited for the aspects of basic emotion I want to preserve. Thus, sometimes ur-means primeval, as when zeit (time, era) is transformed to urzeit (primeval time). Sometimes ur-means original or first, as when aufführung (performance or show) becomes uraufführung (première), when text (text) becomes urtext (original text), or when knall (bang) becomes urknall (the Big Bang). Sometimes ur-means primitive, as in mensch (man) and urmensch (primitive man) or trieb (urge or instinct) and urtrieb (primitive instinct). In a few cases ur-simply intensifies or deepens the meaning, as when komisch (funny) becomes urkomisch (extremely funny) or when gemütlich (snug, cozy) becomes urgemütlich (very cozy).

This network of meanings seems to capture much of what is compelling about the idea of basic emotion. When watching a chimpanzee mother holding her infant, a group of juvenile rhesus monkeys engaging in a play chase, or a scolded dog with its tail between its legs, one needs to refer to the recognizable similarities in the emotions without implying that the animals’ emotions are the same as the humans’. Ur-emotion elicits the idea of an underlying commonality quite nicely, suggesting shared evolution and ancient origins without implying identity or equivalent centrality between different species. When comparing the anger of the British to that of the Utku Eskimos or Yanamamo native South Americans, ur-emotion suggests the similarity without suggesting that the vast differences in socialization, evaluation, social norms, cultural centrality, and social consequences have no effect on the emotion’s form, function, or subjective experience. All these senses come from the meanings of ur- that are apparent in any German dictionary.

The Ur-Text and Ur-Hamlet in Textual Criticism

A suggestive analogy may be drawn to the practice in textual criticism of tracing multiple versions or variations of a story back to an original source, known (even in English) as the ur-text. An example would be Shakespeare’s Hamlet, which we know from three different written versions, the first and second Quartos.
of 1603 and 1604, and the First Folio of 1623. These written versions are our only record of the performances Shakespeare directed around 1600, but the Hamlet written by Shakespeare is known to have been preceded by a variety of plays with similar plots. The oldest of these is Amleth, written by Saxo the Grammian around 1190 (Hansen, 1983). Saxo’s Amleth had murder, marriage of the widow to the victim’s brother, as well as revenge. A much later Amleth, written by Belleforest in 1570, added chivalry, adultery, the hero’s melancholy, and a young woman devoted to Amleth. There is evidence of a play called Hamlet produced after Belleforest’s Amleth but prior to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, probably around 1588. No written text has ever been found, and the author is unknown (but is suspected to be Thomas Kyd). This play is known to textual critics as the Ur-Hamlet produced after Belleforest’s Amleth but prior to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, probably around 1588. No written text has ever been found, and the author is unknown (but is suspected to be Thomas Kyd). This play is known to textual critics as the Ur-Hamlet, shared a great deal with Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and scholars can recognize these commonalities when viewing the Shakespearean version. Yet, despite these similarities, no scholar has ever maintained that the qualities unique to the Shakespearean play are a superficial elaboration on what is essentially the same Basic Hamlet; no critic has ever dismissed the uniqueness of Shakespeare’s Hamlet on the grounds that it was merely a blend of, say, Basic Hamlet and Basic Macbeth. Rather, the innovations of Shakespeare’s version—the subjectivity, the sense of being inside the character’s psyche, the moral complexity, the psychological subtlety, the poetic power—are absolutely celebrated.

So here we have a second basis for the term Ur-emotion. Ur-texts are thought to be an original or primitive version of a subsequent text that they precede historically. The ur-text is a source of the subsequent version. We might apply this model to ur-emotions when thinking of the similarity between human and other mammalian emotions. Just as we can recognize the Ur-Hamlet within Shakespeare’s Hamlet, so too might we recognize, say, a mammalian submission display within human shame or embarrassment. In neither case would we equate the two, nor trivialize their differences.

The Ursatz in Schenkerian Music Analysis

A third example of the meaning of the ur- prefix can be found in a form of music analysis developed in the 20th century by Heinrich Schenker (1935/1979). According to Schenker, the complexity of a symphonic theme or movement can be reduced to a simple underlying structure, called the ursatz, that captures the basic framework of the melody (urlinie) and the accompanying harmony. This reduction is accomplished by simplifying the foreground music (the vordergrund) to one or more middle grounds (mittelgrunden) until the underlying ursatz is reached. The process is illustrated in Figure 1, using a familiar tune in hopes of being understandable to readers unfamiliar with musical notation. A long melody such as the “Ode to Joy” theme from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is shown to derive from an ursatz consisting of an urlinie with only five primary notes (with stems going up) plus underlying harmony of three primary and two secondary notes (stems going down, hollow notes having greater primacy).

Figure 1. Schenkerian music analysis is demonstrated with the melody of the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, 4th movement. The actual melody (A) constitutes the foreground (vordergrund), which is analyzed as an elaborated form of a simpler underlying musical progression (B) the middle ground (mittelgrund), which itself is an elaboration of a very simple underlying structure (C) the ursatz. The major parts of the ursatz are numbered in dark circles; those of the mittelgrund are numbered in light circles. The dark and light circles above the vordergrund indicate how the parts of the mittelgrund and ursatz correspond to the actual melody. (Based on Figure 109(e)3 from Schenker, 1935/1979.)
The term ursatz is translated variously as “primordial structure,” “fundamental structure,” or “proto-structure.” The term ursatz is usually translated as the “fundamental line” of the melody. It must be noted that the purpose of Schenkerian analysis is not to show that only a few basic structures underlie most Western musical compositions (although Schenker believed it to be so). Rather, the emphasis goes the other direction: that from a few basic patterns unfold the wonderful variety of Western music. The main focus is not on the ursatz but rather on how the ursatz is connected to the foreground via the middle ground (Blasius, 1996; Jonas, 1934/1982). For example, the same ursatz that underlies the “Ode to Joy” also underlies “Aus meinen Tränen spriesen,” the second song from Schumann’s Dichterliebe, and no one would claim those two works are essentially the same “basic song.” According to Schenker, the ursatz is both the underlying structure of music and the source of musical variety. It is transformed by elaboration and the conventions of musical style to yield actual musical compositions.

By analogy to ursatz, ur-emotion can be thought of as the underlying structure of actual emotions. It is the source of variety in different cultural contexts, transformed by culturespecific meanings, valuations, functions, scripts, and all the other ways described by research on culture and emotion. Ur-emotion refers to the structure or archetype that underlies an emotion that is evolutionarily related and recognizable shared between cultures and species, but it is not identical to the occurring emotion itself.

Implications

Bob Solomon admired and valued the research that was motivated by basic emotion theory, but he insisted that the dangers of reductionism had to be avoided. This article has introduced the term ur-emotion in an attempt to retain desirable aspects of the meaning of basic emotion while avoiding the reductionism. The suffix ur- is intended to evoke an underlying, primordial structure without implying anything that is primary or ethnocentric. Just like ur-texts and ursatzen, ur-emotions are not encountered directly, but their underlying presence and influence can be perceived. Insight can come from recognizing underlying similarities across species or cultures, and reductionism can be avoided by recognizing that differences between species or cultures may yield emotions that are unique in important ways.

This article has necessarily been somewhat vague about the nature of the underlying commonalities that characterize an ur-emotion. The fuzziness of the concept of emotion (Parrott, 2007) transfers to the concept of ur-emotion. Like emotions, ur-emotions can be described at the biological, individual, or social level of analysis. Like emotions, ur-emotions can involve a variety of components such as expression, action tendency, cognition, feeling, and self-regulation. Like prototypical emotions, prototypical ur-emotions combine most of these elements, but no element or set of elements is necessary and sufficient.

What distinguishes ur-emotions from emotions is their ontological status, which is of a more abstract, underlying nature. The term ur-emotion suggests this difference more clearly than does the term basic emotion. Like the ursatz that underlies Western music, and like the Ur-Hamlet that can be perceived in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, ur-emotions do not exist in freestanding form. Rather, an ur-emotion is recognized as an underlying structure or abstract feature of an actual emotion. Ur-emotions can be perceived in similar but nonidentical emotions in different cultures or species. They are an aspect of actual emotional states, but are not themselves actual, occurring emotions. That’s the difference between ur-emotions and your emotions.

References


