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## Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages

Chad Wiener  
Old Dominion University, [cwiener@odu.edu](mailto:cwiener@odu.edu)

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when we die. Without such indelibly human vulnerabilities a large percentage of the population likely will not accept it. Countless human-to-human relationships fall apart precisely because one or both parties are unsure if the other person is sincere in their feelings for them. Centuries of anxiety about ‘true love’ cannot be dissolved in a black-box, no matter how convincing the outputs are. While there is much that we don’t understand about what it means for one human being to love another, only the most jaded believe it to be utterly impossible for us to do so. By contrast, the belief that machines can only *pretend* to feel anything for their human companions will not only be the default position, I strongly suspect it will be a very recalcitrant one as well.

Perhaps nothing will ever bridge that gap for many people, but if anything can it must surely involve a deep understanding of just what emotions *are* beyond sets of behaviors that we associate with them. It is arguably unfair to criticize Yonck for not treating this problem (which could easily consume several volumes by itself) with sufficient depth, when the book clearly aims to survey more than spelunk. Nonetheless, given the objective of the book to forecast “our future in a world of artificial emotional intelligence,” failing to tackle such a deep and abiding problem in at least a chapter-length treatment seems like more than just a missed opportunity.

Garret Merriam

California State University, Sacramento

Correspondence: merriam@csus.edu

***Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages.*** Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, Cambridge: Polity, 2018, xiii + 364pp. \$28.95 pbk. ISBN: 978-150954663

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*Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages* by Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy covers vast areas of Western Medieval times to show that emotions or sensibility was core to their conception of human life. The authors aim to question and dismantle both the long-standing view that emotions do not deserve the attention of the serious historian and the grand narrative view that the European Middle Ages was akin to adolescence in human beings and Europeans eventually grew



up and organized themselves by reason via centralized political rule in the Modern epoch. They trace the role of emotions that shaped both the lives and political world from the early monastic enclaves after Augustine to the princes of the late Medieval period. The detail is breathtaking and the scholarship impressive. I am in no position to judge or do justice to the detail of the historical wealth the book contains. I can add that I am sympathetic to some aspects of their project. But some of their analysis of philosophical texts and the conclusions they reach from them I find questionable, and the strength and support they provide their thesis I view to be weak and conflicting. Finally, I see their commitment to a history of emotions as an autonomous project to be untenable but as part of the project of history itself I fully agree.

Although my review is mainly negative, I think that their historical argumentation in the book supports a weaker thesis and one consistent with their aims mentioned above. The authors show that emotions are fluid over time and, most importantly, have a social context from which they are understood, but their explicit thesis is much stronger than these claims: “we are convinced that emotion was at the heart of the anthropology of the Western Middle Ages” (7). I argue that this thesis, along with aims of the work, either proves too much, too little, and possibly not much at all. One core problem they have with their arguments is overlooking the role reason has in human life and solely focusing on emotion and affectivity instead of the interplay between the two. Their view would be better defended if they showed carefully how views on emotion shaped the very conception and use of reason for the people and communities they discuss. Instead, they leave us with only half of the head of these Medieval thinkers and their communities.

First, their thesis proves too much. Boquet and Nagy argue against the view of Norbert Elias and his civilizing process, the idea that emotions are mastered under a “governing principle of rationality” (4) that arose through a certain kind of political rule and organization. Certain emotions or expressions of emotions in the modern context, according to Elias, would be deemed immature and childlike. The authors attempt to show that emotions in the Western Medieval period had their own rationality. But those thinkers sympathetic with Elias’s thesis could simply claim that, if emotion were at the heart of anthropology at this time, this is consistent with their thesis of the immaturity of this age. This is no more clear than their analysis King Edward III conquering of Calais and his subsequent pardoning of the six notable townsmen, which he planned to execute as a deal to spare the rest of the town, by request

of the emotional outpouring of his own pregnant wife, Queen Philippa (218–20). The authors' aim here is to display the use of "emotional community" as a powerful tool in grasping historical events, which I do not dispute, but the event itself shows the kind of contrast Elias holds to be relevant between a Medieval community and the rational organization of the modern state through the means of the King's court. Edward's actions are brought about by a conflicting set of emotions, anger and hatred to destroy the city and soothing love to let those he wanted executed to live, rather than some long-term plan discovered by reason or even some conception of justice. What is not clarified here, as far as I can tell, is the rationality present in the emotions that motivated Edward's actions. This is the issue I turn to now.

But this is where the authors' thesis proves too little. To defend their thesis, they appeal to the passion of Christ and God's love. No doubt these are both important to understand the emotions and the anthropology of this time, but the appeal falls short since at least God's love was not solely understood as an emotion or affect. Core to their argument is the analysis of emotions and affectivity in respect to the understanding of virtue and vice, sin, for key Western Medieval thinkers, which appear mainly in Ch. 1 and 6 of their book. Augustine, they show, subsumed emotions under the will, part of his trinity of the human soul, and rightfully showed that this influenced the view that emotions were an invitation for introspection. But Boquet and Nagy move from this to the view that emotions were restored to rationality (25) and yet even further to the view that "Christian man of the Middle Ages would be emotional, or he would be nothing at all!" (30) In Ch. 6, focusing again on the role of emotions to virtue and vice, they conclude "man's moral path lay in fulfilling his nature, in being an emotive creature endowed with reason" (135). I do not see the support for these moves. It is not that emotions were not integral to the discussion of ethics, this is true for both the Ancient Greeks and Hellenistic thinkers. But reason seems more central for Augustine's morality, specifically, what is the proper order of the soul (*City of God*, Bk. XIX, esp. Ch. 13). Part of the proper order of the soul is to grasp the law and what to command the will to do. The authors would need to argue that emotivity was central to the law for Augustine, in part, because the introspection of emotions is only possible in respect to conforming or falling short of moral law. But I do not see that being so. A similar problem arises for their thesis with Aquinas' thought. If morality has to do with having the virtues, then their view is also ruled out by Aquinas explicitly, who argues that a virtue is not a passion (*Summa*

*Theologiae*, Question LXI, Article 1). The very next article makes clear what the debate about the relation of the passions to virtue is (whether Aquinas' answer is consistent with Augustine's is not the issue but rather whether the issue being debated is framed similarly): whether the virtues are intellectual and without passion or whether passions are present with the virtues. Augustine and Aquinas answer the latter. In other words, being a rational animal, human virtue orders the passions of the soul correctly or well.

The biggest challenge of their work is what they admit directly: there is little agreement about what should be included as an emotion. They appeal to the term "sensibility," which they clarify as follows. "We speak often of feelings, of passions, of affects, and of impulses. But affectivity also includes more stable aspects: atmospheres, moods, and lasting dispositions" (6–7). Including lasting dispositions is what gets them in trouble. If your view of emotions is so broad as to include something that is clearly ruled out as a passion or emotion, at least by many of the people you are writing a history of, since a virtue is a lasting disposition, then your thesis does not prove much at all. Your use of a term sneaks in what is controversial (and possibly the conclusion they try to reach).

This ends my discussion of the philosophical merits of their thesis. There is also some interest in their claim of the history of emotions as a viable project. Their work itself shows merit in the project. But they also seem to claim too much here as well. They assert that their work "has shed light on some of the affective characteristics of medieval societies and their capacity to define hierarchies" (249). This seems to me to be a category mistake. I can only see how affective characteristics are used as content in a hierarchy, not to define it. Hierarchies are defined by a principle or principles of order. This involves reason or some form of cognition (and not just a cognition of an emotional experience or state). But this mistake, I think, produces many of the problems I have pointed out above. It also points to another problem not yet mentioned of their work. There is a live question whether emotions themselves are as malleable as they suggest. As Socrates points out to Calicles in the *Gorgias*, if affections (*pathos*) were not held in common we could not communicate our experiences to each other (481c–d). If emotions or sensibility were as malleable as the authors suggest, Socrates' view here implies that history itself would be a hard discipline to practice. I do agree with the authors that emotions play a very different role in the lives of Western Medieval people than they do for those living in the 20th or 21st century, and this is not only important to recognize, we might fail doing any history justice if we

did not acknowledge this. Like Boquet and Nagy, I too hold that emotions often play a key role in human communication and so play a social role in how we live our lives. Emotions are not mere private phenomena of human life. But I suggest here that it is more the interplay of social structures and concepts of social living with emotions that make human life be very malleable and not constant across time, so the same or similar emotions in one society play a different social role in another. Much like the Aristotelian view of human action and human virtue cannot be reduced to principles of reason or emotions, so the same can be said about human life and how we understand it. Trying to reduce all that is valuable in history and human life to one side or the other leaves us with half of a head or, as Ancient and Medieval thinkers would say, half of a soul.

Chad Wiener  
*Old Dominion University*  
 Correspondence: [cwiener@odu.edu](mailto:cwiener@odu.edu)

**On Truth.** Simon Blackburn, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, iv + 118 pp. \$12.95 pbk. ISBN: 978-0-190-86723-1

With the creation of the internet and social media, we are fed misinformation at an unprecedented pace. Yet, promising to endow readers with a much-needed roadmap to navigate the twists and turns of what many have called the “post-truth” era of American and English politics, Simon Blackburn’s exceptional monograph *On Truth* provides a careful analysis of truth, our access to it, and its authority. The task in the first half of the book is to articulate and analyze historically important theories of truth, while the second half is concerned with applying theoretical tools obtained in part I to areas where truth is often purported to be absent, such as in judgments of beauty, ethics, and religion. In addition to recommending this resource to the public, I also highly recommend *On Truth* to academics, as philosophers and other academics have played a non-negligible role in generating rampant skepticism and relativism throughout the population.

In Part I, Blackburn approaches this project in the way that a chef approaches a stew: by gathering fragments of theories of truth and



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