

# EMOTIONS AND CONCEPT OF SELF IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Giovanni Maciocia

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In this presentation, I will discuss the Western view of emotions as described by various Western philosophers, ancient and modern, by modern Western psychologists and by neurophysiologists.

I personally think it is important to do this in order to balance the view of emotions in Chinese medicine with that of emotions in Western culture. This is important for two reasons.

Firstly, we should not look at the Chinese medicine view of emotions as the only possible one: as we shall see, there is much more to the emotions than their being merely causes of disease as they are in Chinese medicine.

As we shall see, although some Western philosophers do look upon the emotions as causes of disease (as Chinese medicine does), others consider them an essential way in which our mind works.

Secondly, it is important to explore the emotions as seen by Western philosophers and psychologists because their view stems from Western concepts of Self.



The concept of Self in Chinese society differs greatly from that in Western societies.



This has an important relevance in the exploration of how the Chinese medicine's view of emotions applies to Western patients.

A constant theme in all of Western philosophy, ancient and modern (with few exceptions), has been that the emotions (or passions) are factors that cloud Reason. This point of view is similar to that of the three main Chinese philosophies, i.e.;

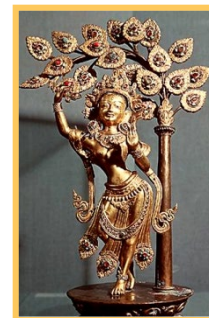
CONFUCIANISM



DAOISM



BUDDHISM



According to this view, emotions are blind forces that sweep reason away and lead us into trouble.

The metaphor of describing emotions as overwhelming natural events is very common in Western philosophical literature and many Western philosophers do see emotions as causes of disease in a similar way as Chinese medicine does.

James reports from ancient writers:

*“Images of civil strife within the soul are matched by a view of the passions as natural disorders - as storms, torrents, tempest.*

*They are winds that put the mind in tumult, sweeping us along like ships in a gale.*



In these metaphors, passion is understood as motion. The passions are turbulent, they are furious reboundings, they are violent and rash sallies (sudden attacks).



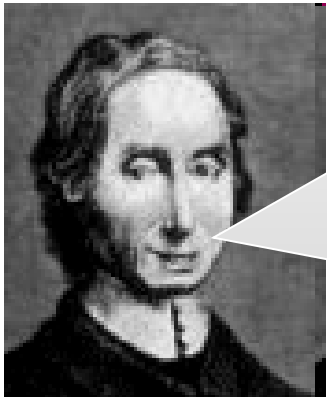
As such, they are often portrayed in addition as diseases, pathological states in which we easily succumb and of which we need to be cured. The passions induce blindness of understanding, perversion of the will, alteration of the humours.”



This view of emotions accords with that of Chinese medicine in which the action of emotions is described as a “surge” like the surge of a wave.

The Cartesian philosopher Malebranche (1638-1715) expressed a disdain of emotions in the strongest terms:

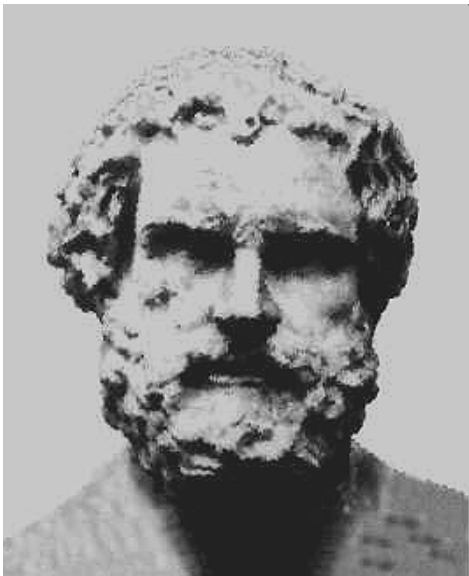
*“Impose silence on your senses, your imagination and your passions, and you will hear the pure voice of inner truth.”*



From this perspective, the intellect provides accurate information, while emotion clouds our minds with disinformation.

Young even went so far as saying that emotions have no conscious purpose and cause a “*complete loss of cerebral control.*”

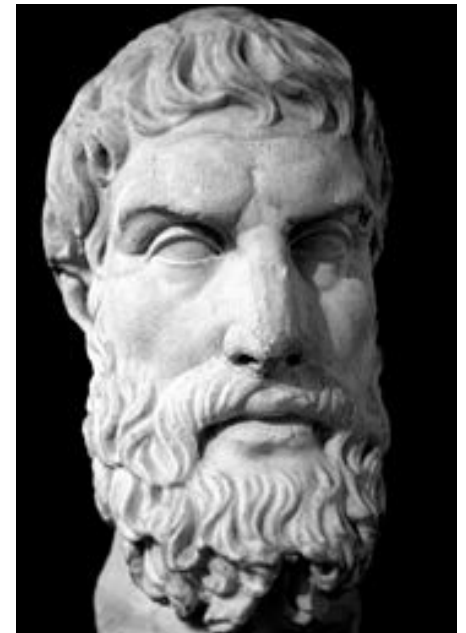
Over the course of centuries, various Western philosophers have advocated different strategies for achieving release from emotional turmoil, e.g.:



the *euthumia*  
advocated by  
Democritus



the *tranquillitas*  
of Seneca



the *ataraxia* of the  
Epicureans, etc.

However, there have been dissenting voices over the centuries, especially from:

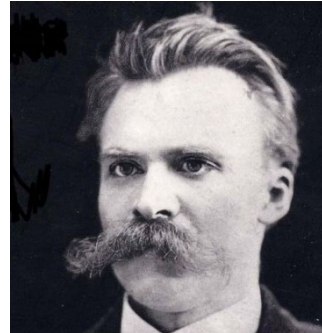
Hume



Spinoza



Nietzsche



Sartre



In modern times, Solomon strongly makes the case for emotions being judgments and he disagrees with what he calls the “Myth of passions”, i.e. that emotions are factors that cloud our reason and mind.

