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#374: Not merely emotion: Reclaiming "passion" as a driver of human behavior

VOICEOVER

This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ANDI HORVATH

Hi, I'm Doctor Andi Horvath, thanks for joining us. Today we get up close to a human driving force, our passion. Consider the spectrum of your passion, it can range from a healthy motivation to an unhealthy obsession or even addiction. While the emotions that play a part in passion are central to the domains of psychology and psychiatry, passion itself seems to be taken seriously these days only in the arts and self-help literature. Our guest on this episode, philosopher of the emotions, Professor Louis Charland from the University of Western Ontario in Canada. He argues that passion, a term once used regularly by philosophers and medical scientists of long ago, continues to describe a human experience that is distinct from mere emotion. He says there's much to gain by reinstating the role of passion in our empirical understanding of the world.

Professor Charland is also known for reframing certain psychiatric and health problems, such as the potentially fatal condition of anorexia nervosa. He asks the question, what if anorexia nervosa wasn't a disorder, but in fact a passion. How would we rethink the diagnosis and, therefore, the treatment? Louis Charland is an international partner investigator with Australia's Centre for the History of Emotions, Louis welcome.

LOUIS CHARLAND

Thank you.

ANDI HORVATH

Now the word passion, there are phrases like the Passion of Christ, which references his suffering, and if you follow contemporary career advice you're told to follow your passion, that is your interests. There's even lusty references to the word passion, in the sense of so-called passion-parties. So help us understand this notion of passion.

LOUIS CHARLAND

Well, there's a long history of passion. Now note that I'm using here the English term. We can go back to ancient Greece where people used a sort of lexical cognate of that term, if you will, the pathé with an accent, normally we render it pathé. But, in fact, it's a very long and complicated variegated history, with changing conceptions of passion. The word emotion itself, of course, is not part of that history until much later, often identified symbolically with the passions of the soul of René Descarte who introduces the term emotion, émotion in French, into the scientific vocabulary. Although it had some etymological precursors, such as when people talked about emotions of the pulse or emotions of the clouds.

ANDI HORVATH

What's the Latin root of the word passion?

LOUIS CHARLAND

There are some cases where the derivations of the Latin passio, pasiones or passioni are present, I think St Augustine is one famous source who writes and uses the term passion in Latin. However there are long periods of times and many writers I've come to know - because I'm not, myself, a specialist in this particular period - where the term passion is strangely absent from Latin. Cicero, in translating the work of famous Greek authors, in fact omitted to use the term passion and instead chose to use terms like perturbacio, perturbations of the mind. We now translate that as emotions, but of course he was using it to do the job of passions as well. So it's a very complicated history. Thomas Dickson in his book, From Passions to Emotions, has done a very, very good job of laying out, if you will, a structure and a timeline for which to place certain of these central figures in that history, and their very differing views.

ANDI HORVATH

Alright, well let's take this concept of passion in the contemporary sense. You've suggested that we've mistakenly lumped passion into the same basket as emotion.

Explain that.

LOUIS CHARLAND

Well, if you were to walk down the aisles of an imaginary library on works on the affective domain - affective meaning affection, the touch-feely stuff as I refer to it sometimes for lack of a better umbrella terminology, affectivity is a word I like to describe the domain as a whole - but if you were to imagine this library, on one side you would have had books on the passions of the soul, the usage of the passions and a lot of the classical literature on this topic would have fallen there. You would have had no mention, whatsoever, of the term emotion in anything like its present sense. You may have had some of its etymological roots - *emovere*, to move, *movere* and things of that sort - but you wouldn't have had emotions in a psychological sense. That development comes much later in the 1800s, people like Dickson argues.

Now imagine that we're in today's library, the book stacks, none of them will have the title passion in them, virtually none of them, maybe a few. But then they aren't using the term in the same sense that it was used in the other library. The principal keyword of the affective sciences of the scientific domain of affectivity in this other bookshelf is really emotion. So emotion is now the key word of the affective sciences. This is a beautiful way to put it and it's largely true. It's a claim made by Thomas Dickson himself. There's even been some surveys by leading emotion theorists about the prevalence of the term emotion as a key word in the affective sciences today. So the word passion has largely dropped out of serious scientific inquiry into the mind. We don't speak of passions anymore and, as a result, the word emotion has had to pick up a lot of the slack left behind by that conceptual change.

ANDI HORVATH

So emotion has sort of taken up the space where perhaps the word passion has been used. Let's define passion. Passion is something you have when you do things that really interest you, like you may be a collector of sorts, whereas emotions are perhaps more fleeting. Let's start to define those parameters of passion and emotion. What are the differences?

LOUIS CHARLAND

Passions are complex affective behavioural cognitive syndromes that are centred around what most of the people who talk about passions, in the history I'm concerned with, called fixed ideas, *idée fixe* in French. So at the heart of any passion you have a fixed idea and that idea might be called, in modern terms, a goal. But note that a goal is just a goal, it's an intellectual, cognitive item, and just ideas by themselves don't move us to anything. We need what we call motivation. Well what

is motivation? Is motivation sort of one box of mechanisms, and then goal and ideas part of another box and so on, in our float charts of how we represent the workings of the mind? Perhaps. The passion account is meant to be totally embodied. That is to say that the mind and the body are thoroughly intertwined and embedded, not only in the biological [world] but in culture eventually. You have both cognitive dimensions, you have the fixed ideas and you have the ability to reason. Passions, in fact, require reason according to a lot of their defenders and they use reason to achieve their ends.

So you have the fixed idea, the complex behavioural, and now I want to add progressive and evolving affective syndrome. A complex series of habits designed around a specific purpose that may alter and grow as the habits evolve, that defines as fear of meaningful activities and organises the person's behaviour over time. So take, for example, Charles Darwin who is the great collector of biology. He pursued the collection of biological fossils and specimens with great passion, in fact we can call collecting his passion. In fact, one of the early lead experimental psychologists, Théodule Ribot, who is also trained as a philosopher, referred to collecting as a passion. So there really is a historical basis, a documented basis in the literature on passion from which I draw, to call collecting a passion.

Darwin's a very nice example because he began his passion innocently. He might have collected butterflies, he might have collected pebbles and stones of different sorts. As life evolved and he entered the sciences and pursued his interests, he expanded his fervour for that goal for just collection. We know the story, it produced a beautiful, marvellous edifice of scientific research and erudition that is unequalled in the history of science. Now imagine this, Darwin has a passion for collecting, he's on an expedition, he arrives at a new location and he finds a fossil in the woods as he's walking around the campground. He's delighted, he has an emotion, he's overjoyed. Now that joy is a short-term momentary response. It happens to him because, in fact, he's looking for fossils. I mean why is he looking for fossils? Because he's got a passion for collecting biological specimens.

The guide along with him has no emotional reaction whatsoever, it's just a piece of rock for him. But Darwin then has an emotional response that is explained in relation to his passion. He sees another fossil and one of the guides steps on it and breaks it. Darwin is crushed, he's disappointed, dejected, he's angry, he's frustrated. The guide himself has no such emotional reactions in response to that particular episode. So why, again, do you have that particular emotional response? It can only be explained in terms of the fact that Darwin's life is animated by this search for biological specimens and so on. He's impatient, a mood state, before he leaves on the expedition, he's anxious before they arrive at the [shores], anxiety, feeling states of different sorts. Again, they're only explainable in this particular way of putting the story, in terms of the passion hypothesis as a ruling, motif, framework, purposeful guide in his life.

ANDI HORVATH

I'm Andi Horvath and you're listening to Up Close. In this episode we're talking about passion, its history and its connection to emotion, with philosopher Professor Louis Charland. Louis, let's talk about that notion of passion and the spectrum of passions. I really want to ask you the question, is passion healthy and unhealthy?

LOUIS CHARLAND

This is what's so interesting about the construct of passion for psychopathology. One of the famous defenders of the theoretical necessity - I'm not even saying theoretical legitimacy, but necessity - of the concept of passion is the philosopher Immanuel Kant who employed the term, *Leidenschaften* in German of his time. Again, the nuances here are important historically and we'll just overlook them for now to try and stick to the general point. But Kant distinguished very sharply between passions and emotions in some rough, general sense that's of interest to the kind of distinction that I'm trying to develop and explore. According to Kant, all the passions are unhealthy, they're always unhealthy. Sometimes less morbid, sometimes very morbid but they're always unhealthy.

ANDI HORVATH

But they give life force.

LOUIS CHARLAND

They do, they do. In fact, this is a point that was recognised much later by Théodule Ribot who, though he is clearly, explicitly inspired by Immanuel Kant, insists that the passions - like Descartes did much before - have a positive role in life. That, for example, they provide life with meaning, they provide life with purpose over time, they help organise life around a series of purposes. We have different passions, I have a passion for teaching, I have a passion for cooking. Luckily one of them doesn't predominate completely over the other, to the exclusion of taking care of my family. But when a passion does cross that invisible line - going back to the example of Darwin - what you have is psychopathology. So you have, in fact, hoarding. If Darwin had collected his species and piled them up in his house and not taken the time to identify them and itemise them, document everything carefully in files and write things up in textbooks and his scientific works, you would have had a case of hoarding and you wouldn't have had the marvellous scientific erudition and creativity and productivity that we saw with Charles Darwin.

So the passion for collecting then can be very healthy. Like the passion for restricting one's eating for an elite gymnast. Or for somebody that's concerned with fashion purposes, being a fashion model and restricting one's weight. Those can be legitimate, modestly healthy, sometimes very healthy concerns to have in guiding and organising your life. But, for example as in the case of anorexia, when that fixed

idea, I must control my weight, starts to increase and gain in momentum and starts to encompass more and more weight restricting activities and starvation behaviours or quasi-starvation behaviours, what you have is the beginning of psychopathology. One feature about passions is that they are progressive and feed on themselves, and almost like an avalanche can sometimes collapse on themselves in destruction.

ANDI HORVATH

We're going to talk more about anorexia nervosa. But I do want to ask, is the Nth degree of passion addiction?

LOUIS CHARLAND

It's not clear that, I at least, can make a pronouncement on that yet, based on the sort of research I've done. I think that we can say that some of the things that we now call addictions, like gambling addiction or substance addictions - Locke was a philosopher but he was also a doctor. Locke has a very long description of drunkenness, according to which it's a passion. You know, there's a fixed idea behind this set of behaviours, it's very hard to turn around, it's got a self-reinforcing negative affect. So some addictions, already in the history of medicine, were considered to be passions. But Ribot tells us about ambition, ambition being a passion, collecting is a passion, cooking can be a passion, teaching can be a passion.

ANDI HORVATH

Podcasting can be a passion.

LOUIS CHARLAND

Indeed and it's a very healthy passion, I think, in this case.

ANDI HORVATH

It may be all very well to revive a term such as passion. But what practical use, what application could it have for real-world problems? What if the psychiatric condition, anorexia nervosa, wasn't a disorder but, in fact, a passion? Anorexia of course is serious stuff, killing more people than alcoholism or depression. So what does passion have to do with anorexia?

LOUIS CHARLAND

A passion can be just a passion and a healthy passion. So, for instance, in my example previously I described sort of relatively healthy weight restricting behaviours as something that people set on as a goal for the long-term, for months. If they're in gymnastics and competing for 10 years, that's going to be a passion that they're going to maintain for all those years. So there's a reasonably healthy passion there, until it crosses a certain line. At that point we have worries, the person's spending too much time obsessing over food, starting sometimes to lie, to hide food. You see the passion overtaking a bit many of the other person's life interests. They might have had a passion for their boyfriend or their lover, they may have had a passion for their family, for walking their dog, for cinema. In fact, when a passion like the one centred around the fixed idea, I must restrict my weight, starts to take on more meaning and to amplify itself, as passions sometimes do in their progressive development, then you have the beginning of mental disorder.

So asking is anorexia a mental disorder or a passion, well it can be both. It depends on which stage and which part of its development you're focussing on. The important thing about the passion's account is that it provides an account of the organic continuity of that condition when it becomes a serious mental disorder. It provides an account of what we call, in the history of medicine, the course of the condition. In present day science we talk about anorexia nervosa as an eating disorder. We don't talk enough about its course, about the stages in its course. When you focus on the course over time, you see that some cases are cases where the passion turned into a mental disorder. But other cases the passion just was extinguished by another passion. So somebody who was a healthy gymnast for 15 years ceases to restrict their eating behaviours to conform with certain weight requirements and body mass index requirements, and picks up maybe even cooking as an alternate passion.

ANDI HORVATH

You've mentioned this idea of treatment involving a substitution of one passion with another. Is that now how they're approaching that type of condition?

LOUIS CHARLAND

Well here I have to make clear that I am one participant in a collaborative study and that there is a clear scientific basis behind what we are saying. It can be disputed, it can be debated, it's been published in the peer reviewed literature. It's an empirical study called, Anorexia is a Passion. But I'm working with three psychiatrists who specialise in anorexia and who have done so for years. So it is they who conducted the study from which we derive the passion hypothesis. We had your famous eureka moment where we realised that my otherwise disconnected work on the history of passions and nineteenth century French psychiatry, over dinner we realised in discussion that it fit their data. Current therapies for anorexia nervosa are so-called cognitive behavioural therapies. They're talking therapies that involve thinking and reasoning, identifying illogical beliefs, identifying illogical inferences. Classical

cognitive behavioural therapies with a lot of modifications, mind you, including emotion-focussed cognitive behavioural therapies, but they're still cognitive. So they address the disorder from the point of view of thinking.

If we're right, passions are really not a disorder in thinking at all, and it's no surprise that these therapies are as ineffective as some people claim they are, including in large part the specialist I was working with. It's no surprise because we're dealing with an affective disorder. You don't talk somebody out of alcoholism, you don't talk somebody out of anorexia. To be fair, people have done very good jobs with these therapies, there's lots of documented, evidence based studies that show that you can make progress on certain questions in a person's treatment on certain particular issues. But as a global approach to treatment, and even as a global framework from which to view treatment, this is not maybe the most productive or efficient way to view the disorder. When you view the disorder as a passion, it's an affective disorder that is progressive in nature, for reasons that we have yet to understand.

We know that in anorexia there is neurobiological feedback that upsets the cardiac system, that cognition is affected and so on. That happens also with substance addictions and it also happens with non-substance addictions like gambling. So the passion hypothesis with its claws, if you will, that passions can feed on themselves and engulf more and more of a person's life, thus creating more and more negative consequences, is compatible with those kinds of observations.

ANDI HORVATH

I'm Andi Horvath and our guest today on Up Close is philosopher of the emotions, Professor Louis Charland. We're talking about reframing the notion of passion, and the potential of philosophy as a tool for understanding human behaviour. Louis, I have another question for you too. That is, we can see now using medical brain scans and various tests that shed light on what's going on in the brain in patients of anorexia. In some ways could they be a physical map of passion and addiction?

LOUIS CHARLAND

One difficulty that your questions points to, which I think is absolutely fundamental in terms of thinking about the passions from the point of view of the history of the cognitive and neurosciences, is the fact that passions are complex affective states of long duration. Our current methodologies for the study of emotion, since at least Descarte in 1650 was inspired by Harvey's work on the heart, has been focussed on the here and now. On measurement of clinical phenomena within the 10 second to one minute to two hour sort of timeframe. So if you look at a lot of work in cognitive psychology on facial expression and emotion, a lot of work on neuroscience, fMRI work in particular, there are time limitations to how long you can actually observe the phenomena actively in their very nature, as they are progressing and as they are changing. So while there are methodological techniques - and I underline, I'm not a

specialist in this domain so I take my lead from some of my collaborators - but while there are techniques to try and come up with psychological experimental methods and neuroscientific methods that can deal with the problem of duration, they're not very successful.

In psychology we talk about diary studies, but they're notoriously not of the same empirical calibre and strength as the rest of the cognitive sciences. So that really duration, a passion can endure for months and years. It can wilt and then come back, addictions have that character, chronic relapsing character. If you look at this from the point of view of the history of science, we're stuck in the here and now, in our sort of Kuhnian paradigms that are producing incredibly interesting and valuable research. None of what I'm saying, or what we are saying, is meant to displace or devalue this research. But we're missing part of the picture. We need passions, first of all just as a theoretical construct, because we don't have any construct for enduring affective states of that complexity of long duration. We don't have passions in modern science.

ANDI HORVATH

Louis, play with us here, what are some other archaic words used to describe human mental states that are worth, perhaps, reviving or reinvigorating? My colleague said to me, what about melancholia or humours. Any reflections on those?

LOUIS CHARLAND

I wish I had some fun examples on the tip of my tongue. But melancholia I think is one of those examples where perhaps we've done best to leave it behind. It was so complex when you compare the uses of that term, and the distinction between melancholy and melancholia which is a major distinction in certain segments and periods of the history of psychiatry. Most people see Emil Kraepelin's development of the terminology of dementia praecox and manic depressive illness as a positive step forward. So it's not all previous terminology. I didn't go fishing, if you will, for old terms. I came across the term passion, and the distinction between passion and emotion, in a discovery when I was part of a translation team that translated the first ever English translation of Philippe Pinel's second enlarged Treatise on Mental Alienation, which had never been available to the English speaking world until 2008.

So we were translating this work from French in to English, realising that a lot of Pinel's previous works had involved translations where the term passion was exchanged for emotion sometimes, or where there was just idiosyncratic shifting back and forth. I was the one that we engaged in this translation that spoke very forcefully with my colleagues, David Healy and Gordon Hinkish saying, we really have something special here. Pinel, as a clinical psychopathologist and clinician, as a psychiatrist, documenting his interventions, laying out his treatment plans and his patient charts and so on. Pinel is telling us that we can use emotions to cure morbid

passions. You shock people using fear, using bursts of humour, using diversions that are theatrical and comedic, out of their fixed ideas in which they are locked through their passions. So that, in fact, Pinel provides us with clear operational criteria to distinguish passions and emotions in his psychopathology and in his treatment modalities.

We find the distinction between passion and emotion in another writer of that time, in the development of therapies associated with moral treatment, Vincenzo Chiarugi at the Florentine Hospital. Chiarugi explicitly uses the terms *passione*, *emozione*, I mean those exact Italian words. His translators have often used the term emotion to indiscriminately capture the distinction without the nuance.

ANDI HORVATH

Louis, you talk about passion as a long-term affective state or a process that organises relatively short emotions. Aren't there other such states we encounter? Like grief, it contains a number of emotions like sadness, anger, regret.

LOUIS CHARLAND

Grief is one of these interesting cases, which Théodule Ribot notes, where a short-term emotion that has the name of emotion, in this case grief, can morph and develop and evolve into a full-blown passion. Build on itself to the point you can't get out of those symptoms of grief, where they have captivated you and you're part of a process or a progression that just seems to get worse and worse. At some point grief turns into, what we now call, major depressive disorder. Now this is a very, very complicated matter. I mean there are people that have written books, like *The Loss of Sadness*, trying to distinguish grief the emotion, what they call. They don't talk about passions incidentally and this would help. It's an area, again, where we can contribute perhaps to elucidating some of these questions with our research. But grief, the emotion, may have the same symptoms as major depression, the clinical syndrome in some respects, but they're of a different nature.

Grief will often resolve on its own. So it can be a passion that lasts for a year or two and it works itself out as a natural emotional process that has gone to the stage of passion and then extinguished by itself in its normal course. But it can also take hold and cause other changes in the brain that leave it ingrained and more permanent and would definitely require medical treatment.

ANDI HORVATH

This is kind of a general question. But where might these life passions actually come from?

LOUIS CHARLAND

Certainly in the literature on emotions and in contemporary emotion theory and neuroscience of emotion, there's a big effort to ask and answer the question, are there elementary emotions that we have or basic emotions? Are there some emotions we share with other mammals, for example, and maybe other animal species? How do emotions evolve in the life of the child, in the life of the adult? We study those questions. Now as a passion theorist, it's going to be the kind of question that I'm going to have to answer. I don't have all the answers at this stage and neither do my heroes, if you will, or my inspirations. But passions might have some genetic components. People might be predisposed to certain kinds of passions based on their psychoanalytic makeup, various internal combats or forces or psychic conflicts that they experience. They may be driven to one passion more than another because of factors like that.

If you're a behaviourist you'll look at propensity to being reinforced by certain factors in the environment. Some historians have argued that the introduction of the weight scale in European history made it possible for us to develop the obsession we have for weight. Now, until we measured ourselves and weighed ourselves and developed the technologies of weight, anorexia took a certain kind of cultural shape in societies of that sort that it might not have had in earlier societies where there were similar syndromes, fasting in saints and things of that sort. So the question of origins is open. But the first step is to just define the concept in a manner that makes it workable, operationally definable, and testing its value as an explanatory concept. I'm arguing that science needs passion, and the idea is that we cannot provide an adequate account of long-term complex emotional states and processes and engagements unless we have something like the concept of passion that I've been promoting in my works and with those of my collaborators.

ANDI HORVATH

Thank you so much for taking us through the semantics of passion and for being passionate about passion and reinstating it in our dialogue. Louis Charland, thank you for being our guest on Up Close today.

LOUIS CHARLAND

You're welcome, thank you very much.

ANDI HORVATH

We've been speaking with philosopher of the emotions, Professor Louis Charland from the University of Western Ontario in Canada, on the understanding and reinstatement of passion in human psychology. You'll find details of Louis'

publications on the Up Close website, together with a full transcript of this and all our other programs. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 20 July 2016. Producer was Eric van Bommel, audio engineering Gavin Nebauer, and I'm Doctor Andi Horvath, cheers.

VOICEOVER

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