

**Ljiljana Radenović**

*BEYOND UNIVERSALISM/SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM DEBATE  
IN THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS: THE CASE OF ACEDIA*

*APSTRAKT: Peter Toohey (2011) argues that the feeling of acedia, initially described by the Desert Fathers, is a romanticized version of the simple boredom felt by ordinary people. For Toohey, acedia is not real, but manufactured, i.e. a socially constructed emotion, unlike regular boredom which is universally felt. This distinction indicates that Toohey sides with universalist approach to emotions, which helps him avoid relativism of social constructivism in the history of emotions. However, by claiming that acedia is manufactured emotion Toohey is in danger to negate the reality of an emotional experience that many individuals seemed to have had. The goal of this paper is to outline the way we can overcome the shortcomings of Toohey's approach to acedia. For this purpose, I argue, along with Griffiths (1997), that all our emotions have their roots in both culture and biology. I also argue that a job of a historian of emotions is to engage in the phenomenology of emotions of our predecessors.*

*KLJUČNE REČI: acedia, social constructivism, history of emotions, phenomenology of emotions*

## **1. Introduction**

In *Boredom: A lively history* (2011), Peter Toohey has an interesting take on acedia, a feeling often defined as a mix of boredom, sadness, and restlessness experienced by those who live isolated lives in monastic communities. He argues that acedia is a predecessor of what we now call existential boredom and is, in a sense, a romanticized and intellectualized version of the simple boredom that ordinary people universally feel. For Toohey, acedia is not real but manufactured, i.e. a socially constructed emotion. By drawing a distinction between constructed acedia and regular boredom and granting reality only to the latter, Toohey does two things. First, he identifies what emotions belong in the real (natural) emotional core of all human beings. Such emotions appear in all cultures across space and time, even though some cultures tend to

elicit some emotions more often than others. Regular boredom is one of these, but acedia, by virtue of its social construction, is not. Second, by arguing that socially constructed emotions are not real, Toohey hopes to avoid the all-consuming relativism generally associated with social constructivism. More specifically, it is often assumed that if human emotions are socially constructed, they may dramatically differ from group to group and will be incomprehensible to people who do not share the same linguistic, historical, and social background. But such relativism does not sit well with what biologists, psychologists, and our intuitions tell us about human nature. Therefore, one of the main goals of Toohey's book is to offer substantial arguments against relativism of this kind.

In this paper, my goal is to develop a framework for thinking about human emotions and their history, including acedia and simple boredom. I agree with Toohey's basic idea that emotions are not entirely relative to their cultures, and hence, incommensurable. But, I believe it is important to find a way to accept that acedia and existential boredom are real, even though they are socially constructed emotions, without falling into the trap of relativism. In the first part of the paper, I examine the concept of emotions, their causes and their expressions to determine to which extent these are socially constructed or biologically based. Paul Griffiths (1997) offers a particularly insightful analysis, and I partially rely on it. Along with Griffiths, I argue that all our emotions have their roots in both culture and biology, so the division between socially constructed and biologically based emotions is not a viable one. Dismantling this dichotomy allows me to conclude that acedia and existential boredom are real emotional experiences even though they may be constructed through slightly different narratives (monks vs. philosophers). In addition to clarifying the nature of emotions, I make a related methodological point by arguing that the emotional experience in which a historian is interested is not the same as the universal physiological emotional reaction that interests a biologist or a psychologist. The historian is more interested in reconstructing an overall emotional experience shaped by the beliefs held by people of the past, the values they accepted, and the languages they spoke and shared with other members of their community. In this way, a historian is doing a phenomenology of emotions of our ancestors which neither excludes nor is necessarily opposed to biological (usually universalist) accounts of emotions. My goal is to explain how this kind of synthesis of universalist and constructivist positions is possible.

## **2. Acedia in Toohey's history of boredom**

In *Boredom: A lively history* (2011), Peter Toohey devotes an entire chapter to acedia. According to Toohey, acedia as it appears in the literature of the Desert Fathers (particularly Evagrius, but later Cassian), is a feeling of boredom that may manifest

as melancholia, anger, and restlessness. Toohey argues that the key element of acedia is the basic boredom caused by repetition and the predictability of everyday routines typical of a life in isolation and confinement. Such boredom was considered dangerous in monastic communities as it was closely tied to the questioning of God's will and could slowly erode the sufferer's faith. Thus, it is not surprising that acedia was proclaimed a sin in the Middle Ages.

But could the boredom affecting the monastic communities of the Desert Fathers be similar to the simple boredom of ordinary people? For Toohey, the answer is both yes and no. He argues that monastic boredom or acedia is rooted in simple boredom, but he also says it is close to what we now call existential boredom or ennui: „Existential boredom entails a powerful and unrelieved sense of emptiness, isolation, and disgust in which the individual feels a persistent lack of interest in and difficulty with concentrating on his current circumstances” (Toohey, 2011: 141). Simply stated, the predecessor of the contemporary experience of existential boredom is the religious feeling of acedia.

Now, what do religious and secular kinds of existential boredom have in common? Both emerge when a person starts having doubts about his or her position in the world. Secular existential boredom is a person's feeling of alienation from the world, people, and his/her own occupations and passions, whereas the religious feeling of acedia begins with doubt in God's will and represents the religious person's alienation from his/her calling and God.

Contemporary existential boredom has been described in detail by many philosophers and novelists, of whom Jean-Paul Sartre is probably the most famous. In his novel *Nausea*, Sartre explains existential boredom as a nauseated state, where all that we are attached to becomes strange and distant, and ordinary objects lose their names; even our own bodies become foreign to us. Sartre's main character has to pinch himself to see if his body is really his own. Sartre's existential boredom is also marked by apathy and lethargy. Similarly, when the hermit or monk starts feeling alienated from God and starts doubting if he fits into God's plan at all, he experiences a feeling of „spiritual emptiness, isolation and apathy” (Toohey, 2011:111).

Toohey argues that existential boredom, regardless of whether it is secular or religious (acedia), is an intellectualized version of the feeling of simple boredom. Simple boredom has been documented in all historical periods. However, in the writings of the Desert Fathers a new kind of boredom emerged, wherein simple boredom was transformed into a more profound feeling with a romantic appeal, what Evagrius calls the „noonday demon.” When the demon attacks, the hermit may become sluggish and sleepy; he may even feel the need to return to his previous life unless he is prepared to fight the demon. By calling boredom acedia and relating it to a demon's attack, Evagrius elevates it, and the fight against it becomes noble. Similarly, the secular existential boredom described by Sartre is an elevated form of boredom. It is a more

profound feeling than ordinary boredom; it attacks intellectuals and artists. In other words, those who are prone to thinking tend to suffer from it.

After locating the origins of acedia in simple boredom and identifying similarities between acedia and the modern feeling of existential boredom, Toohey asks how real these experiences are. His answer is that they are not real. They are chimeras, simply intellectual constructs. Even though they are occasionally connected to despair and suicide in literature, this relationship is a literary construction. According to Toohey, the „victims of existential boredom– but not simple boredom – may talk a lot about suicide. But if they do anything about killing themselves it’s usually on paper”(Toohey, 2011: 138). So this connection between existential boredom, great suffering, and even suicide is simply there to reinforce the romantic allure of the experience. „Sometimes it seems,” Toohey argues, „it (simple boredom) has been dressed up by those with special interests, such as in religion or philosophy, and has been made to appear something more than it is: thus the bored and depressed hermit suffers acedia; the depressed scholar becomes melancholic; the lonely philosopher becomes the victim of contingency or Nausea”(Toohey,2011:141). In short, acedia is not a real emotion. It is a concept constructed from a variety of ordinary feelings: boredom, sadness, disgust, apathy. It was born and cultivated in the biblical tradition.

Now, why does Toohey deny the reality of acedia and what are his reasons for doing so? To answer this question, we need to keep in mind that Toohey’s larger goal is to map the history of boredom. Most authors who write on boredom (see e.g. Patricia Meyer Spacks 1996, Elizabeth Goodstein 2005, and Yasmine Musharbash 2007) work within the framework of social constructivism: they believe that all human emotions are socially constructed and relative to the culture we live in. This belief leads many to conclude that boredom is not really a universal human experience but was invented in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of Toohey’s main goals is to develop an argument against such historicism and relativism. So in addition to collecting substantial literary evidence that ancient Greeks felt bored, he endorses a particular theory of emotions according to which some basic emotions (boredom being one) are a universal part of human nature.

Let me explain the theoretical context a bit further. Theories of emotions can be roughly divided into two groups: first, theories developed within social constructivism accepted often by anthropologists and sociologists (see e.g. Lutz, 1988; Levy 1975; Rosaldo 1980); second, theories positing a universal nature of human emotions usually embraced by psychologists and biologists (see e.g. Izard 1977;Ekman 1992). It is not surprising, as Toohey notes, that historians of emotions tend to side with social constructivists if for no other reason than because the very history of emotions seems possible only if emotions are result of a particular time and culture, not biology. Thus, starting with a constructionist assumption, historians propose to do the „archaeology” of emotional experiences felt and shared in past epochs. The psychological theory of emotions they (explicitly or implicitly) endorse is usually a version of the cognitivist

theory of emotions (see e.g. Isen and Diamond, 1989), according to which, emotions are learned ways of appraising a particular situation (good or bad). How people judge a particular situation varies from culture to culture. Accordingly, if we are to understand how people in the past felt, we need to reconstruct what they thought about life, other people, and the world they lived in.

Now, if a historian of emotions gives up cognitivist accounts of emotions and accepts a more biological and hence universalist account, s/he seems to be losing her own research subject. According to biological theories that explain emotions in physiological and evolutionary terms, human emotions have their origins in human evolution. They have played an important role in the survival of our species and are now shared by all people regardless of their culture. It is hard to see how the history of emotions can be done within this biological framework. Universal (biological) traits and capacities have an evolutionary past, but not a history.

Toohey's ambitious goal is to evade the relativism that seems tied to social constructivist approaches and develop a theory of emotions that will allow him to do the history of emotions properly. He contends that while all human beings have the ability to experience particular emotions, societies vary in the degree to which they evoke such emotions. The goal of a historical study of emotions, then, should be to reveal such differences between societies. Historians can do the history of fake, socially constructed, emotions (such as *acedia* or existential boredom) as well as universal ones, but they need to be aware of their true nature. This has not been the case in the study of boredom. According to Toohey, historians of boredom have not properly differentiated existential (constructed) boredom from ordinary (universal) boredom. Instead, they have concentrated on the emotion of existential boredom, thinking they are capturing the emotion of ordinary boredom. Because of this confusion, they often conclude that the Ancient Greeks and the people of the Middle Ages did not feel simple boredom. As noted above, one of Toohey's fundamental objectives is to provide literary evidence that this is not the case; i.e. both Greeks and Medieval people felt bored from time to time.

To avoid the highly controversial claim that the feeling of boredom is a recent historical creation not felt by earlier peoples, Toohey settles with one version of the universalist theory of emotions, according to which we all share the same set of universal emotions, but whether we are going to feel them often or not depends on the culture we live in. Some societies and cultures favor certain sets of feelings and discourage others. Those emotions that do not belong to this universal set but are created in philosophy or literature (e.g. *acedia* and existential boredom) are simply intellectual chimeras. They are not real. Historians can study why we make them up and how they occur but strictly speaking they are not emotions.

But do we really need to argue that *acedia* or existential boredom are not real? Many people claim to have experienced one or the other. In other words, do we really

need to argue that socially constructed or intellectualized and romanticized feelings are not real feelings when they feel very real? In the next section, I turn to Paul Griffiths' analysis of the concept of emotions, their causes and their expressions, and I offer some important phenomenological insights into the nature of emotions. My goal is to explain in what sense human emotions are not entirely relative to culture and how socially constructed emotions are real.

### **3. Emotional expressions and phenomenology of emotions**

If we are to see why Toohey's proposal is not the only way to combat relativism in the historical study of emotions, it is important take a closer look at what it means to claim that basic emotions are universal to all human beings regardless of their culture. We also need to know how such claims are backed up. Let us begin with the latter.

The empirical evidence used to support the thesis of universal emotions comes from research on emotional expressions and recognition of emotional expressions. The first to undertake such research was Charles Darwin (1872). Darwin was interested in the anatomical/physiological aspect of emotional expressions. He described the muscles involved in expression and distributed a „judgment test” to various groups of people asking them to identify the emotions expressed by the facial features of people in a set of photographs. Darwin's conclusion was that there is a universal way in which people express emotions; they use identical muscles for such expressions and can identify such emotions in others. Furthermore, similar emotional expressions, Darwin argued, appear in our evolutionary relatives, e.g. apes. Darwin was aware that their emotional expressions might serve an entirely different function, but he explained this by saying humans had initially developed emotional expressions for the same purposes as their evolutionary relatives; the functions simply changed as humans moved away from life in the wilderness.

After WWII, psychologists like Izard (1972), Ekman (1972), Ekman and Friesen (1971, 1972), inspired by Darwin's insights, did a number of cross-cultural judgment tests within literate and illiterate cultures. Their general conclusion was in line with Darwin's, namely that people, regardless of the cultural group to which they belong, can identify the same set of basic emotions (e.g. sadness, anger, fear, joy, and to a lesser extent, contempt/shame) in others.

Before we discuss these findings, we should note that Toohey's theory of basic emotions is not the same as that proposed by Darwin and other basic emotions theorists. Toohey presupposes certain real basic/ordinary emotions, but his list seems broader than the one cited above. For example, he obviously considers ordinary boredom and apathy to be on the list. However, these emotions are more cognitive than

basic.<sup>1</sup> It's an open question what kind of developmental, social, and biological factors shape these higher emotions, but even universalist approaches allow they are more susceptible to cultural, linguistic, and other social influences than others. When we take a quick look at cross-cultural studies, we see that cognitive emotions vary across cultures. For instance, while the feeling of guilt is present in many cultures, it usually goes with the feeling of responsibility in Western cultures (i.e. you feel guilty only if you feel responsible), and not in others (i.e. you can feel guilty even if you don't feel responsible) (Harre, 1986). Finally, higher cognitive emotions do not necessarily have any neurological correlates or specific physical expressions; nor are they automatic responses to external stimuli.

As we have suggested, unlike cognitive emotions, basic emotions are usually defined and identified by distinctive and universal neurophysiological reactions and emotional expressions. Now, when we return to the emotions of boredom and apathy that Toohey deems universal, we see that they do not have such universally shared expressions. Thus, it is not clear how Toohey can defend their universal essence while labeling *acedia* an intellectual construct. In other words, it is hard to see how he can defend the reality of, say, apathy but not *acedia*.

Having clarified this, let us return to the question what exactly the findings on recognition of facial expressions tell us about the nature of emotions. Many evolutionary psychologists take these findings as evidence that our emotions are universal and innate, i.e. part of an evolutionary biological program (Tooby and Cosmides 1990). Griffiths correctly notes that these conclusions might be hasty and unwarranted. To show this, he differentiates between the input and output side of emotions, with the former covering the causes of emotions and the latter composed of physiological reactions and emotional expressions. As we now see, judgment studies tell us that there is some universality on the output side but are silent about the input side. Showing universality of the causes of emotions would require a different kind of research. Evolutionary psychologists have made such attempts. They often argue that human beings are ready to learn quickly from the environment; some sort of innate learning preparedness enables humans to associate quickly and learn e.g. that snakes and spiders are dangerous.<sup>2</sup> They base their conclusions on the study of the emotional reactions of infants.

Whether or not there are some universal causes of emotions or innate preparedness, a plethora of events and objects trigger a variety of different emotions which can and do vary across cultures (Griffiths 1997). Furthermore, the denotation of an emotion as positive or negative, i.e. whether people are encouraged to feel it and express

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1 For an explanation of the higher cognitive emotions and social constructivism, see Griffiths (1997).

2 For details, see the discussion in Griffiths (1997), Chapter 4.

it, varies from culture to culture. Sadness is not necessarily a bad feeling, nor is happiness a good one (Rosenwein 2006). What this means is that our cultural habits and values play an important part in our inner emotional life; they are constitutive of it even when it comes to the basic human emotions. So if we are to understand how different people in different cultures feel, we need to unpack this cultural baggage. The universality of emotional expressions is uninformative for this purpose. Thus, the methodology that a historian needs to use to probe these feelings has to be different from the methodology used by a psychologist in research on the universality of emotional expressions. Her methodology has to be as different as her object of inquiry.

This brings us to an important (albeit often forgotten) phenomenological insight into the nature of our emotions: all the processes that comprise the emotion and are the focus of biological, psychological, sociological, or anthropological study belong to a unified experience. We need to understand how these processes contribute to a unified experience and what such an experience feels like. A focus on the various components can help us understand the way emotions are formed, where they originate, which processes are universal and probably evolutionary and the like. However, if we want to get a clearer picture of how they actually feel, we need to provide a description of the experience. That is, we need to do a bit of phenomenology.

Solomon (2006) provides a good analysis of this type of phenomenological description. First, such description has to involve the object of an emotion. Solomon argues that we cannot describe an emotional experience without the object (no matter how general the object may be). We can parse the stimulus and response, but the experience of fear is never felt independently of the object. A key phenomenological insight is that our emotions have intentionality; i.e. they are about the world. Through emotions, we assign meanings to the world by valuing certain things, events, relationships, people etc., while devaluing others.

Such a description should also involve the way our self-consciousness and reflection enter into emotional experience. Just as the object of an emotion cannot be separated from the unitary emotional experience, so too, the way we conceptualize emotion and understand our own feelings cannot be separated from such experience. Solomon says: „[An] emotional experience described by phenomenology needs to include both self-consciousness and experience due to reflection as well as unreflective emotional experience. A phenomenology of emotion should describe the ways in which self-consciousness and reflection shape, enter into, and alter emotion and emotional experience” (Solomon, 2006: 303). Note that our concepts and judgments enter our emotional experience on two levels. First, what we feel depends on what we find dangerous, lovable, scary, horrifying, joyful, and the like. Second, what we feel depends on whether we stop and reflect on the way we feel. As Solomon summarizes:

If I am angry but then come to recognize *that* I am angry, my anger changes. If I am angry and come to question the warrant for my anger, my anger radically changes,



and with it my experience. It becomes far more complex. My anger is mixed with and to some extent undermined by doubt and perhaps also by shame. But it is not as if there are distinct „layers” of emotion, corresponding to „levels” of consciousness, with pre-reflective anger at the base, reflective anger on top of that, with doubt and perhaps shame yet another level above. Experience is not so neatly stratified but constitutes a (more or less) coherent whole. (Solomon, 2006:303-304)

Finally, both the object of our emotion and our own self-reflection are profoundly shaped by our culture and language. This means that doing phenomenology is never an ahistoric endeavor.

To sum up, we need to keep two important points in mind when doing history of emotions. First, if we accept that constitutive elements of our emotions (their objects and how we value them) are socially constructed, even in the case of the basic emotions, it is hard to maintain the distinction between biological and socially constructed emotions. In other words, we can say that all basic emotions have a socially constructed part (the input) and a somewhat universal physiological and physical expression (the output), while some cognitive emotions have the input but not the output. Within this framework it is hard to see why and how we would deny the existence of emotions such as *acedia* or existential boredom. They are in no worse position than regular boredom or basic emotions such as sadness.

Second, to comprehend the feelings of people from the past, we need to reconstruct their worldview and language as these are the constitutive elements of a unitary emotional experience. In other words, the job of a historian is to engage in the phenomenology of past emotions. For this purpose, s/he might want to ask a historical linguist for help.

Now, turning once again to *acedia*, it seems that the only way to really understand how the Desert Fathers felt when they were suffering from it is to reconstruct the meanings and values associated with the word *acedia*. By so doing, we may identify what the Desert Fathers thought the causes of *acedia* were, along with its manifestations, objects, and remedies. The same applies to Sartre’s existential boredom. Such phenomenological analysis may show that Toohey’s understanding of *acedia* needs to be broadened, but also that *acedia* and existential boredom are not such similar experiences as Toohey suggests. Regardless of the outcome it is such analysis that a historian needs to engage in if she is to gain an insight into emotional life of people who used to suffer from *acedia* or existential boredom. Such endeavour goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it would be invaluable for the history of boredom.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

In this paper, I have argued that the dichotomy between the naturalist/universalist and social constructivist theory of emotions is a false one. Toohey sides with the universalists, hoping to avoid the radical relativism common in the field of the history of

emotions. In doing this he proclaims that acedia and existential boredom are literary fabrications based on regular boredom, but unlike regular boredom they are not universally felt nor are they real emotional experiences at all. But if we accept that all emotions have socially constructed components, even though some of them might have universally and evolutionarily selected shared expressions, there is no need to insist that the only real emotions are universal, while relative and socially constructed ones are simply literary fabrications. In other words, the take on emotions argued here can help us avoid radical relativism by allowing us to accept significant cultural differences in the way people feel and in the way they think about emotions. Finally, I have argued that phenomenological analysis of emotions, accompanied by the close reading of a text, is a good starting point for historical work that moves beyond the universalist/social constructivist debate and could be applied to lost and found feelings such as acedia.

Ljiljana Radenović  
Odeljenje za filozofiju,  
Filozofski fakultet  
Univerzitet u Beogradu

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Ljiljana Radenović

**Prevazilaženje univerzalizma i socijalnog konstruktivizma  
u istoriji emocija: slučaj ake dije**  
(Apstrakt)

Piter Tuhi (2011) smatra da je osećanje ake dije koje su prvobitno opisali Pustinjski oci romantizovana verzija obične dosade koju svi osećamo. Za Tuhija ake dije nije stvarna, već je proizvedena, tj. socijalno konstruisana emocija, za razliku od dosade koja je osnovna i univerzalna. Tuhi zastupa univerzalistički pristup osnovnim emocijama a konstruktivistički pristup izvedenim emocijama, što mu pomaže da izbegne relativizam socijalnog konstruktivizma u istoriji emocija. Međutim, tvrdeći da je ake dije socijalni konstrukt Tuhi negira realnost emocionalnog iskustva za koje mnogi ljudi tvrde da je stvarno. Cilj ovog rada je da ukaže na način na koji možemo da prevaziđemo nedostatke Tuhijevog pristupa ake dije i sličnim emocijama. U tu svrhu, zajedno sa Grifitsom (1977) tvrdim da sve naše emocije imaju koren i u kulturi i u biologiji. Takođe, argumentujem da je zadatak istoričara da se bavi fenomenologijom emocija naših predaka.

KLJUČNE REČI: ake dije, socijalni konstruktivizam, istorija emocija, fenomenologija emocija