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On the Automaticity of Emotion

LISA FELDMAN BARRETT, KEVIN N. OCHSNER, and
JAMES J. GROSS

Any emotion, if it is sincere, is involuntary

Mark Twain

The year is 1846. You are a stagecoach driver. All is quiet and peaceful as the red sun sets beyond the horizon, the coach rumbles contentedly along, and sagebrush cast long shadows across the lonesome prairie. Hidden in the shadows, however, is a rattlesnake. Disturbed from its slumber by the horses, the rattler suddenly strikes out, scaring the horses into a fearful, frenzied sprint. Out of control, the stagecoach careens towards the edge of a sheer cliff. First you try to soothe your steeds, but they cannot hear you. Then you try to forcibly rein them in, but their strength is too great. Life itself hangs in the balance as you grimly struggle to control the careening stagecoach.

The distinction between wild stagecoach steed and wily stagecoach driver in many ways mirrors the distinction between feeling and thinking embedded within Western Culture. Emotions are assumed to be primitive, automatic, animalistic entities dwelling within us that the more developed human part of our minds come to know about and control. The notion that feeling is first, fast, and feral traces back to biblical stories of the First Family and their misbegotten emotional impulses to taste that tempting fruit. These ideas about emotion continue in modern-day stories of lovers driven mad with jealousy, businessmen blinded by greed, and widows overcome with grief. As Plato suggested long ago in the *Phaedrus*, in each of these cases, our emotions, like wild horses, drive us to emotional places we do not deliberately choose to visit and thus must be harnessed and restrained.

In the first section of this chapter, we outline the commonsense view that emotions automatically play themselves out when we encounter certain situations. We describe how this commonsense view – with varying degrees of elaboration and complexity – forms the basis of a consensual view of emotion that pervades much of the scientific inquiry into emotion. We refer to this consensual view as “the modal model” of emotion. In the second section, we argue that although the

