

# Belief, Emotion, and Health: toward an Integrative Account

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## Commentary on John Cromby's "Beyond Belief"

**Louise Sundararajan**

### Abstract

This commentary identifies in Cromby's formulation of belief the potentials for developing three innovative approaches to belief systems: emotion as meaning, cognition as dialogue, and an aesthetic model of meaning making based on Susanne Langer's integrative approach to feeling and form. It is argued that the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce can help to weave these threads into an integrative theory to shed some light on the connection between belief, emotion, and health.

Keywords: Susanne Langer, Charles S. Peirce, meaning, emotion, aesthetics.

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Whether or not joy was the emotion felt by the author of this thought provoking article, it is the feeling of this reader. In what follows I spell out the reasons behind my positive appraisals in a twofold endeavor: First I examine Cromby's argument for an affective turn in health psychology, with special focus on a few important themes and their potential contributions to the field; second, following the Heideggerian notion of reading as thinking the unthought, I extend Cromby's proposal and fill some gaps in his argument.

## The affective turn in health psychology

There are three important themes in Cromby's target article that warrant further elaboration. First, Cromby argues that beliefs are lived and embodied meaning, hence are properly understood as feelings. This point can be stated the other way around, namely, emotion is meaning (Opdahl, 2002), a perspective that is so far neglected in affective science. Second, Cromby argues that cognition is secondary to the society of minds, which is best modeled by social discourse. This dialogical perspective on cognition is congenial to semiotics-- the study of meaning making or sign action—especially, the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce (Hoopes, 1991).

Third, Cromby shows a cultural sensitivity in using “feeling” rather than “emotion” in reference to the affective phenomena, as he points out rightly that only the term “feeling”—not

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“emotion”—is universal across cultures. Furthermore, by privileging the term feeling over emotion, Cromby has implicitly opted for Susanne Langer’s (1953) aesthetic model over the conventional stress and coping paradigm of Lazarus (1966).

Together, these innovative approaches to belief —emotion as meaning, cognition as dialogue, and Langer’s aesthetic model of emotion/meaning—can contribute to an integrative theory that may shed some light on the connection between belief, emotion, and health.

### Meaning, Feeling, and Health: a Semiotics-based Account

A major contribution of Cromby’s formulation of beliefs lies in factoring in emotions in computing the religion/spirituality and health connection. As Park (2007) points out, the inconsistent findings in the field have much to do with the multiple components of health-- such as psychological and physical wellbeing; belief and behavior--the connections between which are not well established, let alone understood. Factoring in emotion as the common pathway to health will improve prediction, since the connection between emotion and health has been robust and well documented.

However, there has been a paucity of models to explain the emotion and health connection beyond the stress and coping framework of Lazarus (1966). Cromby’s social discursive perspective on cognition lends itself to another testable model on emotion and health-- a model informed by the semiotics of Charles Sander Peirce (Sundararajan and Schubert, 2005). In the following I use three central themes in Peircean semiotics-- centrality of interpretation, meaning making as conversation, and the integration of thinking and feeling—to integrate most of the key points made by Cromby into a coherent account of emotion and health.

### Feeling and Interpretation

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The central tenet of Peirce is that signs require interpretation to have meaning: “A feeling is a mere sign, awaiting interpretation in its relation with a subsequent thought or feeling before it can have meaning” (Hoopes, 1991, p. 10). Cromby (in press) says the same, when he claims that “the meaning of feelings is *necessarily* always interpreted” (p. 10, emphasis in original). This point has important cross cultural implications. A case in point is hope (Averill and Sundararajan, 2005). Whereas researchers in the West find a positive correlation between health and hope (e.g., Snyder, 1994), in the Chinese tradition, it is the rhetoric of emptiness, such as the meaninglessness of things, that brings solace to those at the brink of despair (Sundararajan, 2008).

### Meaning making as conversation:

Along with a long line of thinkers, Peirce claims that thinking is thought talking to itself. Cromby (in press) says the same: “thinking is a discussion with one’s self” (p. 5). From this dialogical perspective on cognition, Cromby (in press) draws a somewhat hasty conclusion: “Consequently we do not have rigid belief systems, but can and do finesse belief—in both interaction and thought—according to occasion, context and situation” (pp. 5-6). In optimal conditions, yes, beliefs can be “enduring, yet variable and flexible” (Cromby, in press, p. 17). However, not all conversations of the mind--both interpersonally and intrapersonally--are optimal; nor are all beliefs created equal. To understand how beliefs have varying degrees of flexibility, a closer look at the meaning making process is in order.

### Integration of thinking and feeling

Central to Peircean semiotics is the notion that meaning making is a dialogical process (Wiley, 1994) -- an ongoing cross talk between systems. Successful cross talk between systems

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results in integration. Of particular relevance to beliefs is the integration of two sub-systems--thinking and feeling. Cromby (in press) has hinted at the integration of thinking and feeling, when he claims belief to be “felt thinking” (p. 12). This point can be illustrated by a Sufi story:

The Sufi master, Uwais, was asked: “How do you feel?” He said: “Like one who has risen in the morning and does not know whether he will be dead in the evening.”

The other man said: “But this is the situation of all men.” Uwais said: “Yes, but how many of them *feel* it?” (Teasdale and Barnard, 1993, p. 74, emphasis added).

As the Sufi master makes amply clear, integrations of thinking and feeling cannot be taken for granted--they are an achievement, not a given.

Failure of integration is understandable, because meaning making, according to Charles Peirce, consists of a dynamic and dialectic interaction between two opposing movements of thought (Lee, 1997)--one feeding forward generating an infinite series of increasingly experience distant interpretations; the other, known as the “reflexive undertow” (Wiley, 1994, p. 27), constituting a reentrant loop from abstract concepts back to feeling and experience. The dynamic interaction between these two opposing movements of thought—one experience distant and the other experience near—is referred to by Tucker (2007) as “vertical integration” between the cortical systems and the limbic core, in some ways similar to what Bucci (1997) refers to as integration between symbolic and subsymbolic systems. The result of neural network patterns traversing in both directions is the emergence of meaning, says Tucker (2007). He further points out that:

The consolidation process across the linked networks . . . is dialectical in that an inherent opposition of structural forms . . . exists . . . Each wave in the cycle of abstraction

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traverses this conflict in some way. In those rare optimal instances of the human mind, the dialectic is extended, recursive, and progressive. (pp. 224-225)

In a similar vein, Teasdale (1999; Teasdale and Barnard, 1993) differentiates between two modes of information processing: direct versus buffered. Direct processing is associated with the mindless emoting mode; whereas buffered processing refers to more extensive processing of related information across multiple subsystems, resulting in integration of thinking and feeling. Individual differences in processing mode have far reaching implications for health. One case in point is overgeneral autobiographical memory (Williams, Barnhofer, Crane, Hermans, Raes, Watkins, and Dalgleish, 2007), a retrieval strategy which capitalizes on categorical memories (Birthdays make me happy) at the expense of event specific details (contextual details of a particular birthday). Cast in the framework of Persian semiotics, overgeneral retrieval strategies are symptomatic of a lack of integration between the subsystems, with the experience-distant symbolic mode running on overdrive, at the expense of the reflexive undertow (Wiley, 1994) that integrates concepts with experience.

Integration of thinking and feeling can be objectively measured, by at least two language analysis programs. One measures the referential process (Bucci and Maskit, 2006) using a set of computer procedures developed out of the multiple code theory of Bucci (2007); the other is SSWC (Sundararajan-Schubert Word Count), a program based on the principles of Peircean semiotics (Sundararajan and Schubert, 2005; Sundararajan, Kim, Reynolds, and Brewin, 2010; Sundararajan and Kim, 2011). Preliminary findings suggest that these two programs are compatible and complementary, but not redundant (Sundararajan and Kim, August 2011).

### Future directions for theory and research

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My semiotics model extends Cromby's formulation in important ways, with far reaching implications for future research.

### Language as the royal road to the study of emotions

Cromby (in press) claims that feeling is a-representational. By contrast, Charland (1995) states that "Feeling *is* representing" (p. 73, emphasis in the original). Charland goes on to say that "feelings and the *experience* we have of them have an ineliminable representational dimension (no representation, no experience)" (Charland, 1995, p. 73, emphasis in the original). The thinker who can reconcile these seemingly conflicting claims is Langer (1953), who argues persuasively that feeling (a-representational) and form (representational) go together, as evidenced by art in which feeling is invested with form, and form feeling. Langer's dual emphasis of feeling and form helps to redirect our energy from subjective introspection to observable expressions of thinking and feeling, such as language use. This is in perfect keeping with the agenda of Charles Peirce:

Peirce insisted on the necessity of studying expressive forms or external representations rather than attempting to examine thought itself through some kind of unmediated Cartesian introspection. (Parmentier, 1994, p. 42)

### From what to how of information processing

Cromby claims that "Believing is not merely information-processing activity" (P. 17). But there is more than meets the eye in information processing. The semiotics model reiterates the central most important contribution of Shannon's information theory, namely the shift from what to how-- from the content of information to the channel capacity of the medium that transmits the information (Deacon, 2010). In the present context, this entails a shift in focus

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from the content of beliefs to individual differences in the capacity for integrating feeling and thinking. Assessing individual differences in processing mode can shed some light on the differential effects of religion/spirituality on health—why the same beliefs may have different effects on different sub-groups (Sundararajan, in press).

### Toward an aesthetic model of meaning making

Cromby's choice of Langer over Lazarus to model emotions has far reaching implications. Langer's (1953) aesthetic model of meaning making puts a premium on the integration of thinking and feeling. In a similar vein, Cupchik (2005) draws a distinction between reactive and reflective responses to aesthetic materials, a distinction that roughly corresponds to the difference in processing mode between mindless emoting and buffered processing. In the final analysis, aesthetics is the study of “everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning” (Johnson, 2007, p. x). Indeed, meaning making is ubiquitous, as Dewey (1925/1981) points out rightly that “Poetic meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters of richness and freedom of meanings, rather than of truth” (p. 307). In this light, an aesthetic model of meaning making suggests the possibility of weighing belief systems by their contributions to the richness and freedom of other meanings in our lives, a possibility that holds the potential for broadening the scope of the meaning-systems framework (Park, 2007), as well as shifting our focus from prevention to promotion of health.

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