At least since Aristotle identified three modes of artistic proof (pistis), scholars have assumed that étos, pathos, and logos—usually translated as character, emotion, and reason—are three very different elements with which rhetors "compose" a speech or text. Certainly, scholars have portrayed the three as interrelated: William Grimaldi, for instance, sees logos as the whole in which étos and pathos, along with pragma (subject matter), are the parts; Antoine Braet, as well as Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, sees étos, pathos, and logos as being unified in their common presentation through the enthymeme; Martha Nussbaum sees Aristotle’s pathos as being linked to both cognition and desire, thus joining logos with étos, and much contemporary cognitive psychology agrees with her; Susan McLeod, similarly, acknowledges that “we feel as well as think when we write” and agrees with Piaget (among others) that “At no level, at no state, even in the adult, can we find a behavior or state without a cognitive element involved” (qtd. in Derry and Murphy). Yet, throughout all the scholarship, the assumption seems to be that the associations among thought, emotion, and ethics are merely coincidental—much as one might assume that a car’s color, shape, and material are coincidental—and that one might well alter an argument’s ethical appeal without affecting its rational or emotional appeal—just as one might alter a car’s color without affecting its shape or material.

What I am proposing is very different: discourse is a unitary process that can be analyzed into (at least) three phases—cognition, ethical apperception, and emotion—that roughly correspond to the classical “proofs” of logos, étos, and pathos. We can think of ethical apperception
and emotion as being parts of and produced by the cognitive process, or we can think of cognition and emotion as being parts of and produced by the apperceptive process, or we can think of cognition and apperception as being parts of and produced by the emotive process, but in actuality these are one.

This unitary view is that of discursive interaction theory, and it is derived primarily from the work of Donald Davidson, particularly his claim that there is no such thing as language.¹ "Language," in the structuralistic sense we usually mean by the term these days, is, of course, the last great metaphysical illusion. In our field, "language" is equivalent to divinity in theology, or, more appropriately, "intelligent design" in biology. In fact, however, language is just a theory to explain how we make sense of the noises, marks, and gestures we use in order to communicate, a theory we tend to treat as a real entity. "Language" is said to obey cultural, not physical, laws, and so it is a by-product of the Sophistic dualism of phusis and nomos, nature and culture, and this assumed dualism also lies behind the oppositions between thought and emotion, the individual (the rhetor) and the social (the audience), reality and appearance, and so on. These oppositions are hard to give up, but give them up we must if we are to avoid further wrangling over the many pseudo-problems these dualisms create, just as we must give up the very idea of "composition," if by composition we mean anything like "the combining of distinct parts or elements to form a whole."

The Cognitive Phase
In an interactionist account of the cognitive phase of discourse, meanings do not exist prior to acts of utterance, and we do not understand them by referring to linguistic "systems" or conceptual "schemes." As one proto-interactionist theorist, Kenneth Gergen, notes, "Words (or texts) within themselves bear no meaning; they fail to communicate. They only appear to generate meaning by virtue of their place within the realm of human interaction" (263). Gergen here is following Mikhail Bakhtin's suggestion that "utterances are not indifferent to one another, are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another" (Bakhtin 91, qtd. in Gergen 264). That is, we grasp utterances' meanings only within the specific history and site of a dynamic dialogic exchange among persons, what Gergen calls a "process of relationship" (265). Gergen could just as well have been influenced by Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological description of "the dialectical structure of reading," particularly...
his explanation of "the processes of anticipation and retrospection" (294, 276–82). Gergen goes further than both Bakhtin and Iser, however, disposing of linguistics and semiotics as explanatory tools and replacing the fundamental linkage between signifier and signified with the linkage between an individual’s actions (which may or may not include the production of spoken sounds or written marks) and the responses of another individual to those actions, responses that “supplement” the prior actor’s discourse, so that, as Gergen puts it, “meaning is not born of action and reaction but of joint action” (265).

Bakhtin, Iser, and especially Gergen go a long way toward escaping the semiotic “prison house,” yet they do not abandon completely the nature/culture dichotomy that undergirds all those traditional ways of thinking that Jacques Derrida liked to label “structuralist” or “logocentric.” They cannot quite give up the belief that “languages” and “cultures” exist really and stand as media between our minds and our world(s). Because they can give up neither this belief nor the concomitant belief that one set of laws applies to “things” while another, completely different, set applies to “language” and “culture,” they divorce the determination of meaning from the determination of truth. Consequently, no matter how individual, multiple, or site-and-history-bound they conclude the production of meaning to be, they still assume that “truth” is necessarily determined after meaning, and so they further assume that truth is relative to meaning, or, rather, to the cultural-linguistic systems (however individually instantiated or historically limited they may construe these to be) that they believe do determine meanings.

Interactionism does abandon the nature/culture dichotomy and the language-culture/truth dichotomy, and so, too, it abandons the traditional conception of language. For interactionism, “language” and its sister concept “culture” are merely reifications of theoretical constructions, treated as if they were real. As Davidson has argued, language is not “a complex abstract object,” not an entity of any sort that could “mediate” between our minds and our world (Subjective 107). Interactionism agrees with Davidson that “We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases” (“Nice” 446). “Language” can neither mediate between mind and world nor be applied in particular cases because language, in this sense, does not exist.

What do exist are the noises, marks, and gestures we make in order to communicate. If, in fact, we do communicate using noises, marks, and gestures with reasonable success, and if “language” as a structural entity,
knowledge of which we can share in advance with our interlocutors, does not exist, then the question is this: if we need to know neither the "same language" as our interlocutors nor how to use that language in specific circumstances, what are the necessary conditions of communication—what must we actually know or be able to do in order to successfully communicate? By answering this question we can get a better sense of how cognition, the process that determines meaning, functions as a phase of discourse.

Donald Davidson has laid out four necessary conditions. First, Davidson says, we need to know when we are interpreting an interlocutor correctly. Second, we need to know when we are not interpreting correctly. Third, we must be able to learn the semantic consequences of the sounds, gestures, and marks the speaker or writer we are interpreting is using. Finally, as interpreters we must share with the speaker or writer a method of interpretation.

We fulfill the first condition, and know when we are interpreting correctly, only when subsequent discursive events fulfill our expectations regarding how our interlocutor should respond to our interpretations. That is, we know we are interpreting correctly when our projections of a "theory" of how the speaker or writer will use noises, marks, and gestures prove to be predictive. Broken expectations force us to adjust our subsequent interpretations and expectations.

We can know when we are not interpreting correctly, thus fulfilling the second condition, only when as interpreters we can know when the speaker or writer has failed to accomplish his or her intention. To understand this condition, we must realize that success as a speaker requires the speaker to fulfill his or her intention for an interpreter to assign certain truth conditions to an utterance. That is, for a communication to succeed, the interpreter must be right in what he or she assumes the speaker holds true—or rather, in what the speaker intends for the interpreter to believe the speaker holds true. This binds an ethical element into the cognitive phase of process, for if the interpreter is to know when the speaker is not using noises, marks, and gestures as the interpreter expects, the interpreter must believe that the speaker is telling the truth within the conditions he or she intends the interpreter to infer. Otherwise, the interpreter will attribute all discourse that does not make sense to causes other than the interpreter's own misunderstanding of how the speaker or writer is using sounds, marks, or gestures. If this happens, the interpreter will not adjust his or her expectations about how the speaker or writer will use them.
Yet, even if the interpreter is prepared to adjust expectations about how the speaker will use noises, marks, and gestures, the speaker and interpreter must coordinate these adjustments by their common reference to a third object of attention whose truth conditions the interlocutors must come to share if they are to interact cooperatively. To put this another way, in order for communication to succeed, the interaction cannot be only an interaction between interlocutors with words (as it remains the case with proto-interactionists such as Bakhtin and Gergen), but it must also be an interaction between interlocutors with words with things they can share ("things" being understood here in the very broadest sense of "possible objects of attention").

Davidson's insistence on this referral to a third object of common attention makes Davidson's theory fully interactionist. For Davidson, the simple fact that there is but one world that we can all share makes all the difference in the world. Davidson calls the interactive process that produces the conditions necessary for such sharing "triangulation" (119). Triangulation refers to the response and counter-response of (minimally) two interlocutors to a third object that both can come to identify as the "common cause" of their respective responses. This process of trial and error, vision and revision, action and reaction, allows the interlocutors' responses to "converge" upon a common cause. Moreover, this process of learning together what things are is the same process as learning what the words that refer to those things mean. For interactionism, language does not operate by one set of laws while things operate by another—the laws are causal, and we understand their consequences through an inferential process. It's not just that we learn how to use language in the same way we learn how to get around in the world—they are the very same process.

Thus, through this same process, we are able, eventually, to learn "the semantic role of each of a finite number of words or phrases and can learn the semantic consequences of a finite number of modes of expression," the third condition we must meet in order to communicate successfully ("Nice" 437). Simply put, as interpreters we learn how those we are interpreting are interacting with us with things with signs. "For this to be possible," says Davidson, "there must be systematic relations between the meanings of utterances" (436). Here, Davidson is not talking about grammatical systems but about systematic relations between and among the interlocutors' discursive actions and the world with its objects to which their actions refer. What makes these relations possible, Davidson argues, is that the interlocutors share, not a set of learned conventions, but
a "recursive characterization of the truth conditions of all possible utterances of the speaker" (437). The minimal theory of truth required might maintain that an utterance is true if the anticipations raised by a belief in an interpreted utterance are met by the consequences of believing the utterance.

Given such a minimal theory, to understand what an utterance means is to understand the conditions that make it true (to our interlocutor). Thus, in order for the interpreter to learn the semantic roles of an interlocutor's sounds, gestures, and marks and the semantic consequences of his or her modes of expression, the interlocutor must be consistent in how he uses them to call the interpreter's attention to the objects of his or her discourse. Because there is but one world, when the interpreter notices that the interlocutor meets such truth conditions consistently, then the relations between utterances can be sufficiently systematic to allow the interpreter to infer their significant differences; that is, the relations between utterances will be systematic enough to allow the interpreter to form theories about how the interlocutor is using marks, gestures, or noises to make references to the world's objects.

The final condition we must meet in order to communicate successfully, obviously enough, is that the speaker and interpreter "share a method of interpretation" such as the inferential method Davidson describes above as the third condition, and from the basis of that shared method they can come to share a theory about how to use marks, gestures, or noises in order to elicit from one another the responses they intend ("Nice" 436). To meet this final condition, interlocutors need not share in advance a "language." It is true that because "a speaker necessarily intends first meaning [the meaning of a word an audience must grasp first to be able to infer its further meanings, such as symbolic meanings] to be grasped by his audience," he will anticipate, and use, the "theory" that he believes the audience will apply to his utterance (436). Such a "theory," however minimal, is something like what we call a "language," but already adjusted to a particular set of circumstances.

Essential to this process is the interlocutors' recursive capacity—the interpretive ability to anticipate what the speaker believes the interpreter believes about the speaker's beliefs, about how to behave discursively (use words, gestures, marks, and so on) in a particular situation. Davidson sketches this shared inferential process, reducing the continual interplay to two distinct phases. The first is the prior theory. The prior theory "is what the speaker believes is the starting theory of interpretation the
The speaker speaks in anticipation of how he or she will be interpreted, and the interpreter is prepared to interpret as he or she anticipates the speaker will speak to him or her. Once the utterance is made, each party enters a second phase, the *passing theory*:

For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter’s theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he *intends* the interpreter to use. (442)

Interlocutors go back and forth in a process of envisioning and revising these theories until the passing theories match.

About the consequences of this process of adjustment, Davidson stresses that although the interlocutors need not share in advance a theory about how to behave discursively (they need not share a "language"), they must share a passing theory, “for the passing theory is the one that the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use” (442). Davidson’s point about this shared inferential method is that “most of the time prior theories will not be shared, and there is no reason why they should be” (443). Moreover, even the prior theory is quite different from what we traditionally call a “language” because “an interpreter must be expected to have quite different prior theories for different speakers”—and, I might add, for the same speakers in different circumstances (443).

**The Ethical Phase**

According to interactionist theory, then, the constitution of the objects of the interlocutors’ attention, their interpretation of the discourse, and their comprehension of the relations between the objects and their discourse are one and the same event: objects become objects *for us* (that is, for we who are engaged in the intercourse) through the process of what Davidson calls triangulation by means of the actions and reactions governed by inference that he calls prior and passing theories. This recursive, inferential process constitutes the topical relations that define our objects for us, and these *topoi* define the things we discourse about precisely because they *are* the ways we can interact with those things. As such, these *topoi* determine the meanings of our utterances.²

If this is so, then, insofar as the function of discourse is to change our own or others’ beliefs (as in inquiry, persuasion), clearly what we must
attempt to change through our discourse is how we or others interact with one another and our world. But the ways we interact do not change unless the conditions that determine how we can interact change first. Change the relevant conditions and we change how we can interact with things; change the interaction and we change the relations among ourselves and things; change the relations and we change our beliefs about the things. There are two main sets of conditions that affect how we can interact discursively: technological and ethical conditions.

The technological conditions of a discursive situation include all our already understood potential ways of interrelating with things causally (again, “things” in the very broadest sense, including humans, animals, concepts, and imaginary objects, as well as inanimate entities—and, of course, words and other signs). Thus, the technological conditions include the many ways we can relate to the objects of our attention as tools, as means of effecting purposeful change in some other thing. We can all acknowledge that the introduction of any novel tool into a situation (whether a concept, an employee, a divinity, a machine, a term, or whatever) enables, indeed, requires us to apprehend new topical relationships and new objects of our attention and discourse); but, perhaps more importantly, the newly introduced tool necessarily affects the character of the questions and problems that define the discursive situation itself. What we can do, technologically, determines what we will think and say. Yet, as we all know, what we will do technologically is determined by what we can apperceive ethically. The technological conditions of a discursive situation may determine what we can do with things using them as tools (the causal relations we believe apply), but the ethical conditions determine what we can use things for (the ethical conditions we believe apply). If a situation’s technological conditions determine the means we have available to effect our ends, the ethical conditions determine the ends we will want to effect. We all know this when it comes to our relations with other humans; yet, just as everything that can be the object of our attention has a technological potential, so, too, everything has an ethical potential. We stand in social relationships with every object to which we can attend. Thus, as the relations that determine the differences between what we do to and with adults and children are ethical, so, too, are those that determine the differences between what we do to and with pets and food animals, what we do to and with garden plants and weeds, what we do to and with words and slang, what we do to and with sacred and profane images, what we do to and with wasteland and wilderness, and so on.
In addition (and this will be a proposition difficult for realists and idealists alike to accept), not only do we stand in social relationships to things as well as people, things tend to stand in certain social relationships to other things, however we may force an order upon them. The price we pay for such imposition is ignorance and superstition. For instance, as Kuhn has pointed out, it makes a difference whether, like Volta, we apperceive the unit cell of the electric battery as two pieces of different metals in contact, with the cells of the battery separated by a liquid, or whether, as we do today, we apperceive the unit cells as the different metals connected by the liquid. The way we apperceive the cell doesn’t change the cell any more than shifting from apperceiving the man as a patriot to apperceiving him as a traitor changes the man. What changes is our understanding of the causal relations at work in the cell: the actual social relations within the cell are metal-liquid-metal, not metal-metal-liquid, and once we apperceive this, we can reconceive everything from the direction of the polarity to the source of the current, and so what we can say about and do with the cell changes (Kuhn, Road 20–24). For us, all objects of our attention play their roles in relation to one another and to us in the roles we accept or assume as we interact with our world.

We recognize only those causal relations that the social relations we accept allow us to recognize. Our recognition of the causal relations that hold among the objects of our discourse is determined, therefore, by the ethical stance we take toward them—our ethos. What I mean by ethos is neither the classical sense of "character" as a set of qualities inherent in a person or thing, nor the postmodern sense of a "moral self" that Richard Rorty has described as "a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it—no substrate behind the attributes" (Objectivity 199). When thought of interactively, ethos is the set of social relations we project upon a situation that determines how we interact with things. The specific topical relations our interactions produce, and the concepts, enthymemes, and beliefs we subsequently develop, are consequences of this projection. We are not our particular beliefs, desires, and emotions; rather, we have particular beliefs, desires, and emotions because of how we stand toward our world ethically. Accordingly, rather than a fixed essence or a continually changing network of beliefs, ethos is more like the role or roles we play (roles that involve assumptions about the roles other things play) in a discursive situation, sometimes according to script but usually improvisationally. Usually, some social group confers upon us our roles and the roles of the objects that concern us, and usually we accept them, but we can assume different roles, and even novel roles,
roles that can project novel social relations among the objects of inquiry, relations that enable us to notice novel possible causal relations and create novel concepts.

If we were unable to change these roles, we could never learn. Certain problems we cannot solve because the social relations that we accept are the product of concerns different from those that produce the relations that would enable us to recognize the actual causes of the problems. That is, certain causal relations cannot be apparent to us until we acknowledge the appropriate social relations. We never could have solved the problem of bacterial disease so long as the social relations we accepted included gods that would cause disease. Freud never could understand the motivations of women because he never could drop his assumption that the family is necessarily patriarchal. Our ethos determines who we are because it determines what we can know.

Ethos, understood interactionally, then, is neither a determining essence nor a system or network of particular beliefs. Interactionally, ethos is closer to the term’s original sense in the context of hunting—of “‘haunts’ or ‘the places where animals are found’”—a term closely associated with “topos” that came to mean, as Charles Chamberlain has argued, “The arena where someone is most truly at home” (99). One’s ethos, in this sense, describes a familiarity with how things relate to one another with respect to a particular purpose in a particular place—a familiarity with the topoi used habitually to solve certain kinds of problems and answer certain kinds of questions. A hunter’s ethos, or role and way of relating to the world’s objects that concern him, enables the hunter to relate his quarry to its tracks and other signs—signs of weather to migratory habits, of vegetation to grazing paths, and so on. A farmer’s ethos would be quite different, with the farmer’s “having an eye for” very different topical relations. A shift from one ethos to another, therefore, will necessarily open some and close down other technical possibilities: the hunter’s ethos would never let the hunter consider “clearing the north forty”; the farmer would never think of picking up stakes and following his wandering cattle. Certainly, ethos in the interactional sense is, in rhetorical situations, functionally equivalent to ethos in the sense of “character,” as any farmer who might try to convince hunters to clear the forest would soon discover. Similarly, an ethos in the interactional sense, if maintained for very long, will develop to become functionally equivalent to a network of particular beliefs. Both the classical and postmodern understandings of ethos depend, however, upon the primordial sense of a habitual, purposeful stance toward and subsequent way of interacting
with objects of a discursive situation. Yet, however habitual an ethical stance may be, we may deliberately change it.

Ethical change seems nothing at all like cognitive change. No rules or scripts govern it and no intermediary steps are followed; rather, the transformation is immediate, very much like a perceptual gestalt shift, such as the one we have to take if we are to go from seeing a duck to seeing a rabbit in Jastrow’s famous sketch, or like the “paradigm shift” Thomas Kuhn describes in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. In fact, I would suggest that these are simply variations of the ethical shift. They seem to be different phenomena simply because we are unaccustomed to thinking of inanimate objects as having social relationships. Yet, we can consider “social relationships” to mean non-causal relations such as association, opposition, and hierarchy, relations which, when apperceived, allow us to predict how the objects of our attention will interact (how they will causally relate) with us and other objects in certain circumstances and so guide how we choose to interact with them. When we do, we can find no significant difference between, say, the kind of cognitive changes that Oedipus undergoes after he has made the ethical shift from seeing his wife, children, and brother-in-law to seeing his mother, siblings, and uncle, and the kind of cognitive changes Newton undergoes when he shifts from an Aristotelian apperception of matter as a neutral substrate to seeing it as particles, and therefore from seeing a body as a substrate impregnated with qualities to seeing a body as particles whose qualities are the result of their arrangement and interaction (see Kuhn, Structure 17–18). In all such cases, those who undergo the shift radically alter their beliefs about how the relevant objects can and should interact, about the consequences of various interactions, about the meaning of statements about the objects, about the rationality of actions within the situation, about their concerns within the situation, and so forth.

Yet, as different from cognitive change as ethical change seems to be, the latter is but a radical extension of the former. When we are confronted by the unexpected, and nothing in our conceptual repertoire that we habitually regard as appropriate will make sense of it, we may risk making an ethical shift. A number of discursive devices require us to make this shift, but metaphor is one of the most common and important. A great deal of theoretical ink has been spent attempting to explain metaphor. Typically, theorists posit that metaphors carry meanings beyond the words’ ordinary, literal meanings, and then they erect some conceptual structure to explain how this could be. However, in a highly controversial essay, “What Metaphors Mean,” Davidson has argued that “metaphors mean
what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more” (Inquiries 245). Metaphors convey no special meanings, and they can’t be paraphrased simply because “there is nothing there to paraphrase” (246). Davidson argues that it’s not what metaphors mean that’s special about them; it’s what they do, because what they say is usually false or nonsensical (247). Only because we assume that the literal falsity or nonsensicality could not be what the speaker or writer intended for us to get from the metaphor do we look for, not meanings of the words we might have missed, but “aspects of things” the words are about that “we did not notice before” (261).

“What we notice or see is not, ...” Davidson claims, “propositional in character” (263). In this respect “getting” a metaphor requires an apperceptive shift much like the gestalt shift we make (if we are able) when shown Jastrow’s duck-rabbit: “I say, ‘It’s a duck,’ then with luck you see it as a duck; if I say, ‘It’s a rabbit,’ you see it as a rabbit. But no proposition expresses what I have led you to see” (263). What has altered is not the sketch and not our perceptual sensors but what I have called our ethical apperception—we see the same lines of the sketch but in different relationships of contrast, juxtaposition, association, and so on. Something similar happens every time we “get” a metaphor—the matrix of social relations in which we recognize the referents of the metaphors words change, not the meanings we cognize. Thus, to use one of Davidson’s examples, when Goneril says, with respect to Lear, “Old fools are babes again,” it is a literal statement but what its falsity induces us to notice is that we can (and should, if we are to understand the causes of an old fool’s actions) ethically apperceive old men as we do babes.

The Affective Phase
We can see, then, that while the cognitive phase of discourse entails a process in which interlocutors adjust with passing theories their prior theories’ expectations of how their partners will interact with words and things, the ethical phase involves changes in the ethical stances we take toward the objects of the discourse, so changing the meaning of what we say about those objects. And while our ethical stance toward a thing determines for us how it does or should relate to other things, often we must alter this stance as a consequence of broken expectations, either about how our interlocutors will interact with things with words, or about how things will interact with us. (Note that if communication is to be successful, just as in the cognitive phase, the interpreter must tentatively assume that what an interlocutor says is true, in the ethical phase the
interpreter must tentatively assume that what the interlocutor says is good, that is, appropriate for the social relations the interlocutor believes actually hold in the discursive situation.) For instance, another's language may seem incoherent until we shift from regarding its object as, say, just another passing adolescent fad to regarding it, as he does, as a portent of evil foretold by ancient prophecy; or his discourse may make no sense until we shift from regarding the woman he is speaking to as just another waitress to regarding her as he does, as his former wife. Thus, the cognitive is thoroughly intertwined with the ethical. While the cognitive phase of discourse requires expectations of how interlocutors will relate words to things, the ethical phase requires expectations of how things will relate to things (again, "things" in the broadest sense—including us). The phases converge where the expectations must be revised—in emotion.

We respond to our broken expectations emotionally. If in our discursive interactions with people and things our expectations were never broken—if everyone thought and spoke as we do, and if we were gods who could rightly predict the behavior of all things all the time—we would never experience emotion. Interactionism argues that successful communication with others requires us to begin with a general assumption that what our interlocutors say is true (according to our lights)—what Davidson calls the principle of charity—and, if I am right, good as well as true (Subjective 149). Thus, the very purpose of communication is not to achieve similarities, for similarity is presupposed, but to discover differences between our beliefs, hopes, desires, and so on, and those of others in order to discover differences between our assumptions about the way things are or should be and the way things actually are or can be. The general function of discourse—all the phases of discourse—is, in short, survival.

Emotion contributes to our survival because it enables us to act on events for which we are cognitively unprepared to act. Emotion signals, both to ourselves and to others, a disjunction between what we conceive and what we believe (or hope or desire, and so on)—any propositional attitude)—a disjunction between our cognition of an event's causal relations and the ethical matrix that we have projected upon the situation in which the event occurs. As Nico Frijda observes, "Emotions . . . result from the interaction of an event's actual or anticipated consequences and the subject's concerns" (6). Or, as Keith Oakley says, "emotions occur when the appearance of the world as we assume it is to be is pierced by reality"; an emotion "occurs with the unexpected; it is a meeting of what is assumed with what we did not assume" (4). Emotions move us, or at
least they move our attention. That is, the discursive function of the emotions complements that of the intentional gesturings we call "language": emotional feelings and displays direct our and others’ attention to sets of relations, specifically social and technological relations, and to the classes of things (such as animate and inanimate, human and animal, and so on) that we relate to ethically and technologically, but they do so by signaling both to ourselves and to others who observe their displays discrepancies between our beliefs about how things should be and the way things actually are. Because we understand any situation from the standpoint of whatever role within that situation that we accept or assume, what we “feel” bodily as emotion is a distance or discrepancy between some ethico-technical relation we habitually expect to hold between the role we have assumed and the role that we habitually assume something or someone else actually or potentially plays in that situation.

Moreover, emotion does not merely register the discrepancy; it prepares us to act—before we cognitively understand why we should act. Frijda accordingly defines emotions as “modes of relational action readiness, either in the form of tendencies to establish, maintain, or disrupt a relationship with the environment or in the form of a mode of relational readiness as such” (71). In short, emotions are the measure of and initial response to the resistance of things to our current beliefs about the situation in which we are engaged. Emotions are in this sense epistemic: they are answers to a problem before we recognize the problem, answers that force us to question our beliefs. They do not give us any knowledge except the most important knowledge—knowledge of our misconceptions, our faulty expectations. William Lyons has put it this way, “an emotion is partly cognitive but . . . not so much a source of knowledge about the world as an evaluation or appraisal of some part of the world in relation to oneself” (71). But this is not quite right. It’s an appraisal of some situation in relation to oneself in relation to others.

Consider Aristotle’s definition of fear: “Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil in the future” (1382a22–23). The anticipated change in relation that may cause us harm is at the same time ethical and technological. When the lion escapes from its cage or the volcano erupts, our social role with respect to lion or mountain may shift from, for instance, that of spectator to potential prey or victim; at the same time, our causal relations to lion or mountain (which determine what we purposefully can do to or with them) may shift as well. The escape and eruption are not mere occurrences but signs to us, even if not (as it may be in the case of human intercourse) signs
for us. As Aristotle says, “the very indications” of such damaging potential to harm us is the cause of fear.

For us to experience fear, we must (1) believe some $X$ to be the case, (2) desire that some possible consequence $Y$ not become the case, and (3) not yet know if $X$ will cause $Y$. The escaped lion, if we were merely cognitive creatures, would induce only questions (Is the lion tame? Is it well fed? Is there another protective device between me and the cage that I could use?) As we consider such questions, we might well become lion food. Emotional creatures that we are, rather than contemplate the possibilities, we yell and run; or stand stock still, petrified; or frantically grab our child—depending upon our own position in the situation’s social matrix. Whatever our response, it cannot be fully understood simply by reference to some primordial, genetically inherited trait, as in Darwin’s theory. It must be understood as a more or less appropriate response to this particular matrix of social relations: how we fear depends on the role we play in the situation.

Moreover, our response cannot be fully understood simply by reference to some buried moment in our personal history, as in Freud’s theory. The response, whatever it is, is not simply a passive response affecting ourselves alone but an action that potentially serves some social purpose within that matrix—even standing stock still, petrified, may facilitate the responses of those who are responsible for the lion, or it may help others simply by not adding to the lion’s anxiety. To a certain extent, as Gergen has argued, emotional displays are scripted performances (standing stock still may be how, our social memory tells us, people who are too weak to fight and too slow to run should act if they are to survive). Furthermore, emotional displays are themselves communicative acts. As Rom Harré and Grant Gillett have argued, “An emotional feeling, and the correlated display, is to be understood as a discursive phenomenon, an expression of a judgment and the performance of a social act” (147). Our screams and tears are messages to others telling them how they should act, given their role (as we apprehend it) in the situation.

An emotion, then, is, on the one hand, the adjustment to sometimes radical discrepancies between the social and causal relations one expects in a situation and the actual or potential circumstance’s resistance to our expectations; on the other hand, an emotion is an improvised “performance” intended to alter a situation in some way. Most of all, however, emotion prompts us to reconceive the situation.

Another way to think of this is by recalling Charles Peirce’s analysis of the thought process in “The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our
Ideas Clear.” He begins with the observation that doubt first appears as an "irritation," a particular emotion that erupts as a consequence of the interruption of a habit: something prevents us from going on as we expect to go on. Peirce says that doubt, a felt contrast between “ought” and “is,” prompts us to ask questions or formulate problems (10). If, as I said earlier, emotion is an adjustment to discrepancies between the social or technological relations one expects in a situation and the actual or potential circumstance’s resistance to our expectations, then clearly Peirce’s “doubt” in the form of an “irritation” is simply a special instance of the function of emotion in general. Ultimately, every question is instigated emotionally, more or less intensely; and since our questions, or problems, define the situation for us (see Bitzer), when our understanding of what a situation is changes—when we alter our beliefs about the way things are—that change is a consequence of a prior change in our emotions. Thus, questions are the cognitive consequence to the emotion we feel when we believe something ought to happen and it doesn’t, or when we believe something should be a certain way and it isn’t.

We can therefore think of emotion in terms of surprise. Davidson, in the course of arguing that no creature can think unless it can communicate, claims that “Surprise about some things is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought in general” (Subjectivity 104). The reason is that surprise “requires that I be aware of a contrast between what I did believe and what I come to believe” (104). This is a belief about a belief, and to have a belief about a belief is to have the concept of a belief. Since “the point of the concept of belief is that it is the concept of a state of an organism which can be true or false, correct or incorrect,” then “to have the concept of belief is therefore to have the concept of objective truth”—the “idea of an objective reality which is independent of my belief” (104). What would show that a creature understands the contrast between “what is believed and what is the case, as required by belief” (105)? Davidson argues that it is discursive ability, since communication “depends on each communicator having, and correctly thinking that the other has, the concept of a shared world, an intersubjective world” (105). This is because, as we have already seen, the discursive process requires us to adjust our expectations of how our interlocutors relate worlds to things when our expectations are broken, and we can adjust them to the extent that we do assume that our interlocutors share our world. That is, we adjust our expectations of how our interlocutors use words only if, when what they say doesn’t make sense to us, we assume it’s because the way
we use words doesn’t match the way they use words, not because they live in a different world.

Surprise is a function of the cognitive phase of discourse, but surprise alone is not emotion. As O.H. Green has observed, “Like emotions generally, surprise involves belief” and is, in fact, “a transition in beliefs” (101). But we can be surprised about something without feeling one way or another about it. We feel emotion when we are surprised to find that something we care about is not as we expected or may not be as we expect. On this basis (modified from Green 82), we can classify four basic types of emotion:

(1) gladness: $A$ is surprised that $f$ and $A$ desires that $f$.
(2) sorrow: $A$ is surprised that $f$ and $A$ desires that not-$f$.
(3) hope: $A$ is surprised that $f$ is possible and desires that $f$.
(4) fear: $A$ is surprised that $f$ is possible and desires that not-$f$.

By this classification, the four basic emotions are modifications of surprise by desire; other emotions are modifications of a basic one, depending upon the kind and intensity of the desire, the amount of discrepancy from the expectation, and the kind of relation ($f$) in question. For instance, anger is a type of fear where $f$ is a social relation with the object of the anger, a relation that $A$ strongly believes is proper, and $A$ believes that the object no longer respects and acts according to that relation, as when a father is angered when his son behaves toward him as if he were his peer. Such a view of emotion—of surprise interpreted by various desires respecting various kinds of expected social relationships—comports with what Jeffrey Walker has described as the “general line of thought” of contemporary neurobiology and philosophy, that a “primitive and more or less diffuse arousal-state . . . may be differentiated into . . . conceptually and culturally constituted emotions, . . . each with its own characteristic ‘script’ or mode of intentionality” (82).

So understood, emotion is neither simply an internal state nor merely a socialized “act”; rather, the generation of emotion is a phase of the process of discursive interaction as Davidson has described it.

Some Consequences
I have argued that our interaction with one another with words with things, or discourse, is a unitary, inferential process having simultaneously cognitive, ethical, and emotional phases that mutually determine one another as we respond to expected and unexpected events. This
implies that most of our discourse is habitual. We engage in similar patterns of interaction when encountering similar situations—commonplace lines of thought from a commonplace ethical stance in a commonplace emotional tone. This is a good thing. If we had to encounter every situation as if it were novel we would be quickly overwhelmed. The word “we” here is important: most of the time in most situations we think, judge, and feel just as the other members of our community—those with whom we regularly interact—do. Compared to our massive agreement about most things, “issues” are rare; yet, broken expectations, not fulfilled ones, focus our attention. Because we are creatures of habit and conservers of our own energy, we work hard to convince others to think, apperceive, and feel as we do so that, well, we won’t have to work as hard at thinking, apperceiving, and feeling when our habitual expectations are not met. We ourselves change our discourse—our cognitive/ethical/emotional responses to events—only when it becomes too much of a struggle to maintain our current habits of thought, belief, and feeling.

An interactionist account of the discursive process helps us to understand that the resistance of others to what seem to us to be perfectly rational arguments is not always (though sometimes) the consequence of their stubbornness, stupidity, or depravity, and it’s never the result of their being in a “different world” from us. No “culture” or “language” separates “them” from “us,” but different habitual ways of interacting with things may because these ways produce different sets of recognizable situations and different expectations respecting them. Our rational arguments may not affect them as we expect because “reason alone” can never alter these habits. It can’t because there is no “reason alone.” Our cognitive habits are always immersed in and qualified by our ethical and emotional habits. Both of these are extremely conservative in character, tending to preserve our already held beliefs, to keep us thinking as we have always thought. A “rational” argument may convince us that some of our beliefs are not coherent with other beliefs we hold more dearly. But changing the ethical stance that allows us to apperceive the relations we believe to exist requires us to trust that what does not seem to make sense actually does; changing our emotional responses requires repetition, enough repetition so that what was once surprising becomes commonplace. These cannot be just added to a rational argument because to change these is to change the very meanings of the terms of our discourse.

What all this tells us about “composition” is that there is no such thing. Discourse is not some thing that can be broken into parts and put together again like a car. Discourse is an intervention in an ongoing,
complex, but normally habitual process. Writing is more like driving a car than building one, and just as when we enter the freeway from the on-ramp our car’s signals, direction, and speed all simultaneously affect the flow of the traffic, so, too, the cognitive, ethical, and emotional phases of our discourse affect the interactions of those with whom we intercourse—sometimes catastrophically, sometimes not noticeably, sometimes in ways most unexpected.

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Notes

1. For some of Donald Davidson’s own views on certain issues of composition theory, see Kent, “Language.” For approaches to other issues in composition theory based on Davidson’s philosophy, see Kent “On,” “Externalism,” and Paralogic; Porter; as well as Yarbrough “Passing,” “Deliberate,” After, and Inventive.

2. For a fuller discussion of topoi and how through our interactions they constitute the objects of our attention, see Yarbrough, “Passing.”

3. The initial and, to my mind, still the strongest argument that sociality is a general characteristic of what we usually think of as “material things,” is mounted by George Herbert Mead. See, for example, The Philosophy of the Present, especially chapter three, “The Social Nature of the Present.”

Works Cited


