Tekst 5

A new reading of the old sob story

adapted from an article by **Mark Honigsbaum**

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When it came to solving riddles like the one of the peacock's tail, Charles Darwin's powers of evolutionary deduction were second to none ─ the more extravagant their feathered displays, he reasoned, the greater their chances of attracting a peahen. But when he tried to account for the human propensity to weep, Darwin found himself at a loss and finally came to the conclusion tears do not serve a function. **[18-1]**

2 In this Darwin was almost certainly wrong. In recent decades, scientists have offered several accounts of how the capacity for tears may have given early hominids an adaptive advantage. These range from the aquatic ape theory, according to which tears were an adaptation to saltwater living, to the notion that by blurring our vision tears may serve as a "white flag" to potential aggressors ─ a signal that the crier is incapable of harm. Then there are the straightforward biological theories, such as the claim that tears evolved to keep the eye moist and free of harmful bacteria.

3 But perhaps the theory enjoying the widest currency at the moment is the notion that tears are a form of social signalling that evolved from mammalian distress calls ─ a clear visual signal in other words that someone is in pain or danger and needs help. "Tears are highly symbolic," says Ad Vingerhoets, a Dutch psychologist who has spent 20 years studying why and when we weep. "Crying signals helplessness, especially during childhood when humans are at their most vulnerable."

4 Although crying has been documented in apes, elephants and even camels, it seems that only humans produce emotional tears, and it is only in humans that crying behaviours persist into adulthood. The challenge is to explain why this should be so, given that crying also runs the risk of signalling our presence to predators. "When animals grow old, most no longer emit distress signals, presumably because it is too dangerous," says Vingerhoets. **[18-2]**

5 In support of his theory Vingerhoets points to the enlarged visual cortex in humans and old-world primates ─ a structure, he argues, that most probably evolved to read the nuances of facial musculature and other strong visual clues, such as tears and blushing. In addition, crying is an

emotional expression that signals appeasement and supplication in adults ─ something that he argues would have been **__14__** in early human communities as a means of promoting greater mutual trust and social connectedness.

6 So far, so fine. But of course crying is not only associated with the human need for attachment. Tears can also be moral, signifying our sympathy with an injustice. Moreover, as the cultural historian Thomas Dixon points out, tears are sometimes associated with joy and ecstasy rather than grief and sorrow ─ hence the mass emotional displays during the London Olympics. Sometimes, as when we weep while chopping an onion, tears may signify nothing at all; at other times they may be an expression of profound grief or sadness.

7 More so than any other form of emotional expression, tears are also subject to shifting cultural and historical readings, symbolising piety and sensitivity in one age and hysteria and weakness in another. Whatever the trigger, however, there is a widespread belief that crying is emotionally cleansing, but even this may be a construct, says Vingerhoets. People frequently report feeling better after watching a Hollywood "tearjerker" with a friend, but when asked to watch a similar movie in a laboratory setting they usually report no improvement in mood at all. For Vingerhoets this is further evidence of the social function of crying. **[__18-3__]**

8 But while we may prefer to cry in the presence of friends and family, this need not be the case. As the pious tears shed by monks in contemplation of God attest, we can also shed tears for distant and highly symbolic attachment figures. What counts, it seems, is the feeling that our helplessness is being **__17__**.

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