

# The Affective Fallacy: Understanding How Your Feelings Can Make You Dumb

The NBC show [Friday Night Lights](#) is about high school football in a small Texas community. High-school students are taking part in a class discussion when the brash star halfback, Brian “Smash” Williams crudely argues that monogamy is unnatural for a male.

The teacher is puzzled by Smash’s statement. A female friend and classmate, Waverly, steps in and translates Smash’s words for the class: “I think what he’s trying to say is that...the male species is hardwired for genetic diversity. So, the instinct is to fertilize as many eggs as possible, to have sex.”

Waverly looks at Brian and adds a zinger, “When we act contrary to our instincts that is when things get interesting.”

Substitute the word *feelings* for *instincts* and Waverly has offered profound advice we can all consider.

We live in a society where, increasingly, feelings are considered the most essential guide to action. Yet, basing our actions on feelings often leads to stupid actions and to misery.

Professor Owen Williamson of the University of Texas at El Paso has compiled a [Master List of Logical Fallacies](#). He defines the *affective fallacy* as the idea that “one’s emotions, urges or ‘feelings’ are innate and in every case self-validating, autonomous, and above any human intent or act of will (one’s own or others’), and are thus immune to challenge or criticism.”

Williamson continues, “One argues, ‘I feel it, so it must be

true. My feelings are valid, so you have no right to criticize what I say or do, or how I say or do it.'”

[Professors Joseph LeDoux and Richard Brown show](#), in a 2017 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, “emotions are not innately programmed into our brains, but, in fact, are cognitive states resulting from the gathering of information.”

Waverly might have put it this way: *Smash, I will not let you get away with your “feelings made me do it” excuses. Our feelings are not innate, but instead, have to be informed by our thinking.* Before rejecting monogamy, Smash would have to think that having more than one partner would create more meaning in his life.

The fallacy of believing feelings are innate is not limited to fictitious characters on a TV show.

On college campuses, [endless lousy behavior](#) has been tolerated by college administrators, as students argue their feelings are self-validating. Students’ feelings have been automatically elevated to the level of truth.

Or consider the [“honor” murdering father](#) who kills his daughter because she had dishonored their family. Not for a moment did he think his feelings weren’t self-validating. If he did, he could never have committed such a heinous act.

Then, there is the recent case of a driver who [rammed another car because it displayed a Trump bumper sticker](#). At a red light, the incensed driver shouted, “You voted for Trump?” When the owner of the car with the sticker said yes, the incensed driver called him “a racist and several other names.” She then side-swiped the stickered car and sped away.

What about our own feelings that we consider self-validating. Cut-off in heavy traffic, have you ever sworn at another driver, certain that your angry feelings were valid and your actions justified?

It seems that drivers who act out of road rage [may believe](#) “they have a tendency to easily lose control of their emotions when they get behind the wheel.” Yet, thinking must light the fuse. Apparently, *I allow no one to cut in front of me!* is a common thought among drivers on crowded urban highways.

When behavior escalates from swearing at another driver to actual violence, thoughts that dehumanize the other person had to come first.

The driver who side-swiped the car of the Trump voter may have been out of her mind, but years of repetitive thoughts about Trump voters lit her fuse. Her angry feelings were just the tip of a massive iceberg of dysfunctional thinking.

I would be surprised if her anger was limited to Trump and Trump voters. Very likely, this woman has suffered through life. Day after day, life may be giving her feedback that her beliefs are causing her misery. Might she dismiss the feedback that life provides because she believes her feelings are self-validating?

A more important question is, are we dismissing the feedback that life provides us? Are we continually sitting under a cloud of our thinking and wondering why there is no sunshine?

If you owned a car with advanced safety features, you would be foolish to override the safety mechanism and speed up as you got too close to the car in front of you.

Yet speed up we do. We allow ourselves to believe our feelings are accurate representations of reality. Feelings we experience in a moment are signaling the quality of our thinking at that moment. Our feelings are not necessarily providing us with accurate information about our circumstances or other people.

In [The Magician's Nephew](#) (a volume in C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*), Uncle Andrew can only hear roaring when Aslan the lion is singing. C.S. Lewis explains Uncle Andrew's failure to see things as they are: “What you see and what you

hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are.”

Lewis continued:

*“And the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring.*

*Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan’s song. Soon he couldn’t have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.”*

When we elevate our feelings as if they are the truth, we are indeed trying to make ourselves stupider. And indeed, we will often succeed in making life miserable for ourselves and others.

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