The reason why fear has emerged as an evolutionary phenomenon is quite evident: a creature without the capacity to feel fear will have a worse chance of surviving and procreating. It is obvious that fear can often be of great assistance to us. It increases our readiness and can thus help us out of dangerous situations or prevent our ever landing up in them. Fear not only protects us from predatory animals and other dangers that exist in nature but also from many self-initiated dangers, like walking straight out into heavy traffic without looking. Fear contributes to keeping us alive. But fear can also become dysfunctional. It does so when a disparity arises between fear and its object, or when it causes us to 'lose our heads'. Before examining in more detail at what attitude we ought to adopt to fear, we ought to look more closely at what kind of a phenomenon fear really is. I intend to use a range of approaches from neurophysiology to phenomenology, and will end up with a perception of fear that to a great extent can be described as a culturally conditioned habit.

To be able to answer the question ‘What is fear?’ we ought perhaps also to answer the question of what an emotion is in general. That is not so simple. ‘Emotion’ is a term that can cover a range of highly dissimilar phenomena – from pain, hunger and thirst to pride, envy and love, from the almost purely physiological to the almost completely cognitive. We can see that the first-named emotions are more ‘physical’ while the last-named are more ‘mental’ entities. In English a distinction is made between ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’, where
the first-named are more ‘feelings’ and the last-named more ‘emotions’. It should, however, be pointed out that there still is considerable disagreement as to where exactly one is to draw the dividing line between ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ and what states belong to the one term or the other.

I do not intend to write all that much about emotions in general in this chapter, but move on fairly directly to fear, although certain basic points and theories must be touched on even so. The social anthropologist Paul Ekman argues for the existence of a set of basic emotions, that is, ones found in all cultures and ones that are not acquired but innate. We can find a similar thought expressed by Descartes. Many people support such a concept, but there is disagreement as to how many such emotions exist and what they are. Most people normally include anger, fear, joy, disgust and surprise, but there is no consensus. In an overview of fourteen lists of ‘basic emotions’ it is striking that there is not one single emotion that is included in all lists. Even if we could assume that such a set of basic emotions exists, we have not necessarily come any closer to an understanding of them, because these emotions can be expressed in quite different ways in different cultural contexts. Cultural norms seem to be crucial in determining which emotions are expressed and to what extent.

Emotions are often viewed as being purely internal, accessible only via a kind of introspection on the part of the person who feels them. They are, however, not simply concealed, purely mental entities but also behaviour, actions and expressions that are visible from the outside. They exist in facial expressions and gestures and are not concealed behind them. Emotions are a way of being present in the world, a way of getting a grip on it and acting in it. Given that emotions cannot be separated from expressions of emotion, and that the latter actually vary quite a bit from culture to culture, it also follows that emotions are culture-relative.
The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty maintains that there is a strong link between an emotion and the physical expression of it. He stresses that the emotion is not something that lies behind or beneath a gesture but is contained in – or is – the gesture:

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account. I know very little, from inside, of the mime of anger so that a decisive factor is missing for any association by resemblance or reasoning by analogy, and what is more, I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.5

This does not mean of course that we would be unable to conceal an emotion, or that a concealed emotion is not ‘real’, but rather that the concealed emotion presupposes the explicit one. Merleau-Ponty considers emotions, their expression and the relations between them as flexible. He claims that the expression of different emotions varies from culture to culture:

The fact is that the behaviour associated with anger or love is not the same in a Japanese and an Occidental. Or, to be more precise, the difference in behaviour corresponds to a difference in the emotions themselves. It is not only the gesture which is contingent in relation to the body’s organisation, it is the manner itself in which we meet the situation and live it.6

As he sees it, it is impossible to distinguish between a ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ level in emotions and their expression in human beings – the natural and the conventional overlap
seamlessly. There are reasons for believing that Merleau-Ponty is exaggerating the randomness of emotions and their expression – but he does have a point.

Several emotions are fairly similar in how they are physiologically expressed. In investigations where people were asked to identify other people’s emotions from photographs, most people managed to identify happy, sad and angry faces, while considerably fewer were able to identify frightened faces, which were often confused with anger, suspicion and surprise. These emotions are normally fairly distinct when subjectively experienced, though it must be admitted that, for example, anger often contains an element of fear.

It is tremendously difficult to distinguish clearly between biological, physiological and social aspects in emotions. Even though the emotions undoubtedly have a biological basis, it is clear that they are also shaped by both individual experiences and social norms. Emotions have an evolutionary, a social and a personal history, and if we are to understand them, we must take all three into account. Emotions are not simply something ‘natural’ and direct; they are also social constructs. The norms for when it is suitable to have and to show a given emotion vary from culture to culture – and also with social status. The ability to learn language is another example of a universally human phenomenon and it too has a biological basis, but the semantic resources vary even so from culture to culture and from individual to individual. The same would seem to apply to emotions. What we fear, and how strongly, depends on our conceptions of the world, of what dangerous forces exist in it and what possibilities we have of protecting ourselves against them. Our knowledge and experience of emotions are not independent of the social context in which they occur.

One approach in seeking to understand emotions is to use their biochemical aspects as a point of departure. It is, however, difficult to distinguish between fear and several
other emotions biochemically – fear and anger, for example, have extremely similar biochemical components. As we shall see later, there is no definite physical state that is a necessary or a sufficient condition for an emotional state: two people can be in the same physical state but have different emotional states, or they can be in the same emotional state but have different physical states. Variants of one and the same basic emotion can have different physical correlations in the same person at different times. Another problem about seeking to identify fear from its biochemistry is that different fears seem to have different biochemical correlations – a person who is afraid of being exposed to an act of violence will normally have a high level of adrenaline, whereas a person who is afraid of contracting an illness will normally not have raised adrenaline levels.

There are physical reactions that are often connected with fear, for example, breathing and heartbeat become quicker and one trembles, or all movements ‘freeze’. Rats and humans have a very similar physiology here, in that the amygdala – the brain’s centre for emotions – is stimulated and sends signals to the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland, which then causes stress hormones to be released from the adrenal glands. As in other animals, our brains react to threats by releasing substances such as adrenaline and cortisol in large quantities, discharging the nervous system faster and dilating the pupils. The amygdala sends signals so quickly that they overwhelm us before we have any chance of intervening rationally.

There is quite simply very little that human reason can do when fear sets in. Montaigne emphasizes that this applies even to the person most governed by reason, namely, the philosopher:

The philosopher must shut his eyes against the blow that threatens him; he must tremble upon the margin of a
precipice, like a child; nature having reserved these light marks of her authority, not to be forced by our reason and the stoic virtue, to teach man his mortality and our weakness. 

David Hume underlines that even the evils that we are scarcely able to imagine happening, because the likelihood of them happening is so infinitesimally small, can arouse fear. Not only that, he continues, but we can even be overwhelmed by a fear of evils that we know to be impossible, such as the fear of falling from a great height when we are in complete safety on a ledge.

You cannot easily remove fear by an act of will, but you can moderate fear chemically by using medication or by getting used to the feared object over time. A sure cure for fear is to put the amygdala out of action, since people with damage to the amygdala are unable to feel fear, even in life-threatening situations. Nor are they capable of discerning fear in the faces of others. For anyone with a functional amygdala, fear is difficult to stop once it comes. You cannot quite simply decide not to be afraid, since rationality in such cases is ‘steamrollered’ by the amygdala, but you can, as mentioned, practise changing your reaction pattern over a period of time.

The American neurophysiologist Joseph LeDoux believes he has shown that fear is controlled by two distinct neural paths in the brain. One of these provides a very swift response, but it also has a tendency to be over-sensitive and often it releases a ‘false alarm.’ The other one is slower, but takes a larger amount of information into account, and this one can stop the first fear response when there does not seem to be any basis for it. It must be stressed, however, that this second response is also a physical phenomenon – we are not dealing with a subject consciously stopping a fear response. Someone who has been badly scared on one occa-
sion by an event or an object will also be more easily scared by the same thing on later occasions. It seems that when being repeatedly exposed to experiences that provoke fear, the organs involved actually grow, so that one is in fact training the organism’s ability to feel fear. This may ultimately result in an organism in a chronic state of fear or anxiety.

The problem with such approaches as that of LeDoux is that they do not take the cultural aspects of our emotional life into consideration. He is basically uninterested in the existence of emotions apart from the purely physiological level, because states of the brain and bodily reactions are considered to be what is fundamental, with conscious emotions being considered only as surface phenomena by comparison. This, however, is to overlook everything that distinguishes human emotional life from what we find in other animals. We would support the claim of the philosopher Michael Meyers when he says that passion is ‘the unique but enigmatic locus wherein people meet animals, and human nature encounters nature’. Exclusively focusing on the ‘animal’ aspects of human emotional life, as people as LeDoux do, cannot solve this mystery. The relationship between human fear and what we find in other animals is a hotly debated subject. It is, for example, paradoxical that fear in rats is a non-cognitive entity (since it is completely unconnected to rational considerations, because rats do not possess such skills), while it is cognitive in humans—and yet we still feel able to talk about the same feeling in rats and humans. I have no ambitions about launching some solution to that paradox here.

Biologically speaking, we are to a great extent equipped with the same apparatus for feeling fear as other animals, but our cognitive, linguistic and symbolical skills provide us with a completely different register of emotion. A hare does not fear a predator that is located on some other continent, and it is scarcely worried by there being residues of pesticides in
the food it eats. The hare’s fear is a result of what is in its vicinity, here and now. It is not first and foremost physiology that distinguishes human fear from what other animals experience, but rather what is capable of arousing fear. Aristotle writes: ‘plainly the things we fear are terrible things, and these are, to speak without qualification, evils; for which reason people even define fear as expectation of evil. Now we fear all evils, e.g. disgrace, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death.’

Everything mentioned by Aristotle is hardly feared by any other creature than man. Human fear would seem, then, to differ essentially from what we find in other animals. Martin Heidegger takes this point to its logical extreme when he claims that only the sort of beings who can relate to their own being can fear, from which it follows that fear becomes something that exists only in human life.

This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, since there is also a strong continuity between what we call fear in humans and a similar state in animals. The Aristotelian definition of man is zoon logon echon. This is often translated as ‘rational animal’, but it can also be rendered as ‘life that possesses language’. Man has linguistic and symbolical resources that other animals do not possess. The capacity to form symbols grants us a certain degree of independence in relation to the world, as we can replace objects by symbols for those objects. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer writes:

Man cannot escape from his own achievement. He cannot but adopt the conditions of his own life. No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront
reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. His situation is the same in the theoretical as in the practical sphere. Even here man does not live in a world of hard facts, or according to his immediate needs and desires. He lives rather in the midst of imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, in illusions and disillusiones, in his fantasies and dreams. ‘What disturbs and alarms man,’ said Epictetus, ‘are not the things, but his opinions and fancies about the things.’

We humans can fear most things. Our fear has a much greater potential scope than the fear any other animal can feel, precisely because we are an animal symbolicum. As soon as we hear of a danger, no matter how distant, we often perceive it as a threat to ourselves. Not least, we construct innumerable imaginary threats – and here we find an important cause of the atrocities humans commit against each other. As Ernest Becker writes:

[M]en are truly sorry creatures because they have made death conscious. They can see evil in anything that wounds them, causes ill health, or even deprives them of pleasure. Consciousness means too that they have to be preoccupied with evil even in the absence of any immediate danger. Their lives become a meditation on evil and a planned venture for controlling it and forestalling it. The result is one of the great tragedies of human existence, what we might call the need to ‘fetishize evil’, to locate the threat to life in some special places where it can
be placated and controlled. It is tragic precisely because it is sometimes very arbitrary: men make fantasies about evil, see it in the wrong places, and destroy themselves and others by uselessly thrashing about.\textsuperscript{22}

Fear can undoubtedly motivate attacks. This is an important point in Thucydides' explanation as to why the Peloponnesian war broke out: the Spartans were afraid because the Athenians were becoming much too powerful, and therefore constituted an ever greater threat.\textsuperscript{23}

Emotions are closely linked to specific patterns of action, and it seems that these patterns of action have developed because they have been favourable from an evolutional point of view.\textsuperscript{24} Fear is typically accompanied by flight or attack. But not always. Many emotions are of such a nature that it is vital \textit{not} to express them in any way. The title of a song by Morrissey is ‘We Hate it When our Friends Become Successful’, and this may at times be true. Envy, not least that of one’s friends, is, however, among the least sympathetic traits of a human’s emotional life, and the envious person would do wisely to conceal it as well as possible. As François de La Rochefoucauld points out: ‘People are often vain of their passions, even of the worst, but envy is a passion so timid and shame-faced that no one ever dare avow her.’\textsuperscript{25} All of us have presumably experienced being hopelessly in love with another person without revealing it by so much as a facial expression or gesture because so much is at stake. Or being in a dangerous situation where one feels fear like a fist to the stomach, but understands at the same time that one simply cannot allow oneself to show fear because the situation will then just get worse. It would be unreasonable to claim that one does not have the emotion in question in such situations simply because one does not express the emotion via a particular action. Emotions \textit{motivate} action, but they do not determine it.
Fear often motivates flight, but it can also be so overwhelming that one is completely incapable of action. Lucretius describes this in *On the Nature of Things*:

> But when the mind is moved by shock more fierce,  
> We mark the whole soul suffering all at once  
> Along man's members: sweats and pallors spread  
> Over the body, and the tongue is broken,  
> And fails the voice away, and ring the ears,  
> Mists blind the eyeballs, and the joints collapse,  
> – Aye, men drop dead from terror of the mind.\(^{26}\)

The person who fears will normally attempt to escape or avoid what he believes is threatening his life, health or interests. The typical pattern of action for fear is thus flight, to attempt to create the greatest possible distance from the feared object, to get outside the range of danger. Flight need not be understood spatially, that is, it is not necessarily a question of running away; it can just as well consist of creating a barrier between oneself and the object, such as protecting oneself with one’s arms or hiding behind a door. The crucial thing is that in some way or other one tries to position oneself where one is invulnerable.

We usually think of bodily reactions being followed by an experienced emotion. A theory that reverses this picture is normally called the James-Lange theory, after the philosopher William James and the physiologist and psychologist Carl Georg Lange. There are certain differences between James’s and Lange’s theories, which were developed independently of each other, but the basic idea is the same: that it is not the emotion that causes the physical change, but the opposite. You do not cry because you are sad, but are sad because you cry.\(^{27}\) Similarly, you do not flee a danger because you are afraid – you are afraid because you flee a danger.
In 1927 the physiologist W. B. Cannon criticized the James-Lange theory, pointing out that the same physiological changes take place in connection with highly different emotional and also non-emotional states.\(^{28}\) He also demonstrated that humans may have a form of behaviour that corresponds to what is normal when one has a given emotion, and that they also report that they have this emotion, and yet they do not have the physiological state that is normally associated with that emotion. Nor have later experiments managed to establish a necessary link between an emotional and a physiological state.

The physical feeling of being harassed is not in itself sufficient to tell me to what extent. For example, I am in a state of fear, anger or sorrow. For it to be able to be identified as a particular mental emotion, something more is needed. In the early 1960s the psychologists Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer advanced a hypothesis that included elements of the theories of both James-Lange and Cannon.\(^ {29}\) Their theory of so-called cognitive labelling says that both physical changes and a cognitive interpretation of these are necessary for one to experience a given emotion. According to this theory, a person will experience anger by noticing that the heart beats faster, that breathing becomes quicker, etc., and then interpreting the situation as one where anger would be an adequate response. The same applies to fear. To what extent an emotion is identified as fear or anger would thus seem to depend on the situation, or rather, it depends on how a person interprets the situation in which he finds himself. Two people who are in the same situation and in the same physical (biochemical) state can identify the emotion they have as fear and anger respectively, depending on their interpretation of the situation. And both of them may, of course, be right. An emotion is not something independent of the situation in which it takes place and the person’s interpretation.
A problem with the theory of *cognitive labelling* is that it would seem to presume that there is always a particular sequence of events, where the ‘physical’ change or feeling comes first, and that this then becomes a ‘mental’ emotion because of a given interpretation. But is it not possible to say that the interpretation often comes first and the emotion follows the interpretation, that one interprets a given situation in a particular way – for example, that this is a situation where I normally ought to feel anger, jealousy or fear – and then the emotion comes?

One’s conceptions and interpretations would seem to be crucial for the identification of one’s emotions. At the same time, they do not seem to be completely determinative, because one’s conceptions of an object can change, while the emotion regarding the object remains the same. As a child I believed that spiders were dangerous, and was terribly afraid of them, especially after my brother was once badly bitten by one. Later, I learned that most spiders are fairly harmless – at least in our part of the world – but the fear of them nevertheless remained. It has diminished over the years, but I do not believe I will ever be completely free of my arachnophobia. A person can be afraid of flying, even though he is convinced that flying is an extremely safe way to travel. This would seem to contradict the theory that one’s conceptions are crucial for one’s emotions, since the conceptions of the object and one’s emotions regarding the object are pulling in opposite directions. My mother has always reacted to mice by leaping up onto the dining table and screaming – just as in innumerable cartoons. She does not, however, believe that the mouse is capable of harming her. She has basically never believed that. Even so, it would be unreasonable to claim that she is not in a state of fear just because she is not convinced that the mouse will harm her. This is a problem for the cognitive theory.

A possible solution to the problem could be that one has not completely replaced former conceptions by new ones,
but rather has contradictory conceptions, that is, that the opposition is not between a conception and an emotion but between two conceptions, where one of them has the decisive influence on the emotions. In fact, we often have contradictory conceptions, where we believe $A$ and not-$A$, for example, when we rationally believe to have done away with a conception (for instance, that flying is dangerous), but it nevertheless continues to apply.

Furthermore, we may be wrong about our own emotions. Our emotions are so strongly influenced by our conceptions that all of us have experienced believing that in a given situation we have emotion $x$, but gradually discover that it is more a question of emotion $y$. The self is not completely transparent to itself, and we may deceive ourselves when it comes to our emotions, for example, because we are unwilling to acknowledge that an emotion underlying a particular action is an unsuitable one. Even though we are occasionally wrong about our emotions, this does not mean that we usually are. For to be able to talk at all about errors in such a context presupposes that we generally identify our emotions correctly – otherwise it would not make sense to talk about ‘errors’.

**Emotions seem to provide knowledge about the world.** Or rather, without emotions there is much we are unable to perceive about the world. An emotion contains conceptions. These conceptions do not deal only with physical relations – for example, a polar bear starts coming towards me when I am walking around the North Pole – but also evaluations; this polar bear is a danger to me. My pulse begins to race, my breathing grows quicker and I start to tremble slightly. There is nothing about these physical changes alone that indicate it is precisely fear I am feeling right now, because other emotional states can be accompanied by exactly the same physical phenomena – sexual ecstasy, for example. What makes my emotion in this situation one of fear is my
perception of being in a dangerous situation. But I would not have been able to experience the situation as being dangerous either without the capacity to feel fear.

Fear always has an intentional object. It is always directed at something. Without such an object we would not be dealing with fear, only heart palpitations, quick breathing and trembling. Fear is something more than these physical states, and this ‘more’ is the intentional object. The intentional object has always already been interpreted. What distinguishes fear from anger, sorrow or joy is not the object in itself but the interpretation of it. One and the same object can be interpreted in such a way that it gives rise to all the named emotions. If I interpret the object as threatening, I feel fear, while an interpretation of it as being annoying can lead to anger, etc. For fear to announce itself, the threat must be perceived as being serious. I must also believe that the danger cannot easily be averted.

One can of course be in a state that resembles fear without being able to say what it is one fears. It is then possible that one ought rather to describe the state as anxiety. Fear and anxiety are closely related states. Both contain the idea of a danger or possibly injury. This threat can, however, be quite specific, or something less precise. A usual distinction between fear and anxiety is precisely that fear has a specific object whereas anxiety lacks this. This distinction is normally connected with Kierkegaard and Heidegger, but we find a precursor for it in Kant: ‘Fear of an object that threatens with some indefinite evil is anxiety.’ The crucial thing here is the indefinite nature of the fear. If you ask a person in a state of fear what he or she fears, the person in question can, broadly speaking, give you quite a clear answer. And if you ask him what he desires in this situation, he can, broadly speaking, answer this as well – for the feared object to disappear, for him to be protected against it, or something similar. The person suffering from anxiety, on the other
hand, will not be able to give any clear answer to either of these questions.

It must be admitted, however, that the dividing line between anxiety and fear is not, in practice, as clear as these conceptual distinctions maybe imply. First, fear can also contain uncertainty as regards both its object and possible ways out: you fear a particular object, but do not know for sure what it is about the object that you fear, or what attitude you would like to adopt to the object. Many anxiety afflictions are also characterized by having an object, that one knows what one is anxious about, but where it is uncertain how the object is going to manifest itself in one's life. Precisely how one ought to – or is at all able to – draw an absolute distinction between fear and anxiety is not going to be discussed further here, and I have chosen to stick to the traditional distinction between the two, as being object-specific and objectless respectively.

When we say that fear always has an intentional object, this does not mean that it always has a real object. Most of us presumably feared some monster or other as a child – whether we believed it hid in the cupboard or under the bed. When young, I believed that there was a ghost in the shower outside my parents' bedroom and, without a doubt, it was eerie, since I had to go through the bathroom to get to my parents at night when the world seemed sinister. Even though there in reality was no monster in the cupboard, under the bed or in the bathroom, this does not mean that this fear was without an object – the object was precisely the monster that I imagined existed in those places. When I am at the cinema and am frightened in a film by a character, it is not because I believe that this character actually exists. I am able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and am perfectly well aware that the frightening character is fictive. And my fear has an intentional object – the fictive character.
What about a fear of ‘the unknown’? The writer Elias Canetti writes: ‘There is nothing that man fears more than to be affected by something unknown. One wants to see what is reaching out for one, one wants to identify it or at least place it in a context.’ Similarly, H. P. Lovecraft begins his classic essay on fear and the supernatural with the words: ‘The oldest and strongest human emotion is fear, and the oldest and strongest form of fear is the fear of the unknown.’ Such a fear of ‘the unknown’ is not an objectless fear. Rather, the object of fear here is indefinite, but is still very much a fear of something. It is a fear that something unpleasant or frightening can occur.

Certain emotions are normally assumed to tell us something about reality. Fear is one of these. It is then considered to be an instrument of perception. All such instruments, however, can function adequately or inadequately. We have seen that a person’s interpretation of a situation is crucial for the person’s emotions regarding that situation. Some interpretations, however, are inadequate, and they will lead to our emotional judgement of a situation also becoming inadequate. As Aristotle points out, we make errors when we fear the wrong things, in the wrong ways or at the wrong times. If, for example, I am afraid of flying but not of driving a car, because I (erroneously) believe it is more dangerous to fly than to drive a car, the emotion will be wrong. I can also feel too much fear in relation to an object that there actually is a certain danger attached to, but where this fear does not have any reasonable relation to the danger. For most people, this has an intuitive appeal. Most people seem to believe that an emotion like fear can be rationally evaluated, that a feeling of fear can be right or wrong. A feeling of fear gives adequate perception if its object is dangerous, and there is a reasonable correlation between the degree of seriousness of the fear and the danger. However, it is not all that simple to specify what is meant by a ‘reasonable correlation’. There are
often large differences between judgements made by risk analysts and laymen concerning different dangers – something we will return to in the next chapter.

It is usually claimed that fear undermines rationality. According to Montaigne ‘there is no emotion that can more swiftly bring our powers of judgement out of balance’ than fear. According to Montaigne ‘there is no emotion that can more swiftly bring our powers of judgement out of balance’ than fear. Edmund Burke follows this up, asserting that nothing robs consciousness so effectively of all reason as fear. And Heidegger claims that one ‘loses one’s head’ when afraid. He gives the example that people in a burning house often save whatever happens to be close to hand, often something of no consequence whatsoever. Different emotions are closely linked to specific patterns of action, and when an emotion announces itself at full strength, these given patterns of action can overrule all rational considerations; or rather, rationality does not come into the picture, so one does not evaluate the more long-term consequences of the action. Actions that spring quite directly out of emotions can be unlike those we would have chosen if we had carried out a more reasoned decision-making process.

Many such critical descriptions of the role of the emotions – especially fear – in our actions, which take fear to be a threat to rationality, seem to imply that we would be better off with a ‘pure’ rationality that is not obscured by the influence of the emotions. There are, however, grounds for asserting that an absence of emotions would also lead to irrationality. As mentioned, people with major damage to the amygdala are unable to feel fear, even in life-threatening situations. Such a person will act irrationally because that which is dangerous does not always appear as dangerous, and thus is not dealt with or avoided in a rational way. The absence of emotions deprives us, in other words, of perceptions that are necessary for rational choices of action.

Fear always contains a protention, a future projection, concerning pain, injury or death. Aristotle claims that fear
is a certain feeling of discomfort or unrest evoked by the idea of being faced with a destructive or painful misfortune.\textsuperscript{41} Hobbes, too, defines fear as the assumption of a future evil.\textsuperscript{42} Adam Smith writes that fear does not represent what we are actually feeling at present, but what we may be going to suffer at a later point in time.\textsuperscript{43} It is not just something to do with a threatening person or event that ought to be avoided. The core of fear is the assumption of a negative future situation. Although not every negative future situation gives rise to fear, something has to be at stake.

All fear is a fear that something is, has been or is going to be the case. One does not necessarily have to believe that what is feared will actually happen. One can fear something even though one believes that it is \textit{not} going to occur. For example, one can be afraid of being struck by lightning when one hears thunder, even though one at the same time knows that the probability of this happening is infinitesimal. Fear would generally speaking seem to be connected with uncertainty. David Hume emphasises this: "'Tis evident that the very same event, which by its certainty wou'd produce grief or joy, gives always rise to fear or hope, when only probable and uncertain."\textsuperscript{44} Aristotle claims that fear is always connected with hope; that one will only fear if there is some possibility for a way out.\textsuperscript{45} Thomas Aquinas is of the same opinion, and therefore points out that those who are damned to eternal perdition will not know fear, since all hope has gone, whereas those who fear always have some small hope of a happy ending.\textsuperscript{46} Is it correct that fear implies hope? It does not feel completely convincing. Let us assume that I am trapped in a burning house, far from a fire station and any other form of help, and that there does not seem to be any possible escape. Would I not even so feel a fear of the flames that were constantly getting nearer until they finally surround me, even though I have no real hope of escaping? Now the Aristotelian can claim that even in such a situation I
would have a tiny hope of being able to escape the flames, that there can be divine intervention, that the flames will not quite reach me, or that something will materialize and help me. It is difficult, however, to see what sort of evidence the Aristotelian might have for such an assertion – it seems more to have been advanced solely to save the hypothesis that fear implies hope, without there being independent evidence of this. It does not look as if there is a strictly necessary link between fear and hope. On the other hand, it would be unproblematic to claim that fear is usually connected with hope. This is, among other things, due to the fact that an absolutely hopeless situation is quite rare – there will nearly always be a possibility, however small it might be, for a situation having a different outcome than that which is feared.

Thomas Aquinas remarks: ‘All fear comes from our loving something.’ What arouses fear is that which in some way or other threatens one’s life-plan. It may a threat to one’s life, health, a friendship, a love relationship, social status, etc. One fear can outdo another. The fear of losing face can be stronger than the fear of physical injury, as when as children we challenged each other to carry out ever more death-defying jumps – something that resulted in one’s body being covered in bruises. Or soldiers who are afraid of being injured in battle, but who are even more afraid of losing face in front of their fellow-soldiers. From this point of view, ‘courageous’ acts can in fact derive from fear. Either way, a wish is central to all fear – you can fear x only if you wish for non-x. In this wish one experiences oneself as being placed in a situation over which one does not have full control.

The emotions are the paradigmatic example of an affective dimension in our lives. Another word for emotions is ‘passions’. This word derives from the Greek pathos, via the Latin passio, which means to be suffering. This ‘suffering’ does not primarily designate pain but passivity, that there is something to which one is exposed, something that happens
to one. Aristotle distinguishes between praxis and pathos, that is, between influencing and being influenced. The emotions are not considered as being self-initiated but as something one, in a sense, receives. One cannot choose an emotion just like that. If one is sad or afraid, one cannot simply choose to have a different emotion that one is more comfortable with. We can influence our emotions in a more indirect way, for example, by placing ourselves in a situation where a certain emotion normally arises. We also possess a certain ability to get rid of an emotion or to suppress it. And we can certainly work on our own emotional life and shape our emotional dispositions. It is clear, however, that our emotions will not necessarily conform to our will.

To experience a given emotion is to experience being in a particular situation to which one has been abandoned. All human perception is conditioned by the situation in which perception takes place, and this situation, quite fundamentally, has an emotional dimension. We can say that the emotion is a condition for something being able to convey meaning in a situation. For an object to be able to appear as frightening, amusing or boring, the situation where the object is encountered must be one with a corresponding emotional potential. To use Heidegger’s term, we can say that the fear demonstrates human life’s basic Befindlichkeit. By this term Heidegger seeks to describe how it is to find oneself in this world. To find oneself in the world is to be exposed in the world, to experience the world as a place that contains meaningful and indifferent objects. This ‘being in the world’ has a basically emotional nature; it is the emotions that enable certain objects to be perceived as meaningful and that, strictly speaking, make participation in the world possible. For Heidegger, we primarily regard objects around us as things to be used, although at times we are notified that these things are ‘unusable, contradictory or threatening’. This is only possible because our
being-in-the-world is constituted in such a manner that things can affect us in such a way. It is this being-in-the-world that enables anything to be experienced at all as threatening. For Heidegger, emotions are not purely subjective but rather 'the fundamental way in which we are outside ourselves'. At the same time, they put us in contact with ourselves. He writes:

An emotion is the way we find ourselves in our relation to beings and thus at the same time in our relation to ourselves; the way we are attuned in relation to beings that we are not and to beings that we are. In the emotion the state opens and holds itself open, in which we have dealings with objects, ourselves and human beings. The emotion is itself this open state... Here it is important to realise that the emotion has the nature of opening and holding open, and that it therefore can be concealing.

An emotion gives you access to yourself and to the outside world, but precisely because emotions are able to open up these subjects in such a way, they can also conceal, and thus give you an inadequate view of both yourself and the world. Heidegger also seems to be of the opinion that fear is an emotion that will be concealing:

We become afraid in the face of this or that particular being that threatens us in this or that particular respect. Fear in the face of something is also in each case a fear for something in particular. Because fear possesses this trait of being 'fear in the face of' and 'fear for', he who fears and is afraid is captive to the mood in which he finds himself. Striving to rescue himself from this particular thing, he becomes unsure of everything else and completely 'loses his head'.

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In Heidegger’s analysis of fear, that which is feared is something that has not yet been realized, something that exists as a menacing possibility that is drawing closer. The feared object ‘radiates harmfulness’. The crucial thing is that this harmfulness has not yet been realized, and that there is a possibility that it will not do so. Fear is thus closely associated with uncertainty. This uncertainty can be described as a basic feature of human existence. In fear a fundamental determination of my being is revealed, that is, the fact that I am exposed. At the same time as fear uncovers something about me, it also conceals me from myself. Earlier, I have stressed that fear always contains a projection into the future. Heidegger for his part also stresses the nowness of fear – that one is locked in a situation and thereby loses something of one’s freedom. He writes: ‘The temporality of fear is an expectant, present-making forgetting.’ What is forgotten is one’s self, or rather, one’s own options. The point is that the future, as a field of possibilities, is restricted since one directs one’s attention solely at the present threat. One loses oneself since one’s attention is concentrated on what is threatening. An emotion such as fear is a way of being present in the world. On the other hand, a world you fear is a place where you can never feel completely at home.

According to Heidegger, one loses sight of one’s possibilities in fear. Jean-Paul Sartre, for his part, stresses that ‘It is by throwing myself at my own possibilities that I escape fear.’ Sartre has an understanding of emotions in general and of fear in particular that differs considerably from that of Heidegger. For Sartre, each emotion has in a certain sense been chosen, and thus it can never eliminate the field of possibilities. Sartre considers emotions as intentional strategies. According to him, emotions are an attempt to change the world via a ‘magical transformation’ of it. The analysis of fear is a clear example of this, since fear is claimed to be an intentional strategy where the subject attempts to remove –
in a ‘magical’ way – an object. It ought to be fairly obvious that this magic is not very often successful, as an object seldom disappears simply because one fears it. When this magical strategy fails to work, the subject resorts to flight. Fear, then, is not the cause of flight, as is normally asserted, and flight is not the cause of fear either, as the James-Lange theory proposes – flight is rather a substitution for a fear that does not affect the magical transformation intended by the subject.  

Emotions are unreflected, according to Sartre, and by that he means that they take place without being objects of awareness. In fear, awareness is directed towards the object of fear and not towards fear as such. Fear is not self-aware. For that reason, emotions are also something that – despite being the intentional products of the subject – partially elude conscious control. We cannot simply transport ourselves into a particular emotion by wanting to have it. On the contrary, the emotions ‘capture’ awareness and make it ‘passive’. And thus we would appear to be in the same situation as that described by Heidegger above, where fear shuts out one’s own possibilities. Sartre, however, seems to believe that the awareness of fear being precisely the own, intentional product of the subject opens up the possibility that one can regain a certain amount of control over it. Because the feeling of fear has been chosen, it can also be deselected in favour of other possibilities. For Sartre believes that we ourselves decide what meaning we are to ascribe everything that surrounds us in existence and how we are to allow it to influence us. In relation to fear, this means that I myself choose to form an ego that fears various things and events. I could, however, have chosen to form a different ego that would have related to my surroundings in a different way.

It can be useful to describe emotions as habits. By that I do not mean to denaturalize the emotions completely, just
to stress that our emotional apparatus is malleable. Emotions are not simply something ‘given’, but something that can be cultivated and changed. Habits can generally speaking be described as acquired responses that people are normally unaware of, but which they can be made aware of. Habits are based on repetition of an ability. Hegel talks about habits as a second nature. This captures something essential about them, since habits are so fundamental and self-evident in our dealings with the world that it would seem that they could not be otherwise. There are physical and mental habits, and tying a tie in a particular way, trying to understand a word in a particular way and reacting emotionally to particular objects and situations can all be described as habits.

Everyone has a host of habits that he or she is unaware of, for the simple reason that consciousness is not normally directed towards them. Habits form more of a ‘backdrop’ for that which consciousness is directed towards. It is determined by habit what we normally look for in a situation of a particular type. Habits select the objects we are to direct our awareness towards, either by our habitually looking at the particular thing or because this thing, for some reason or other, breaks with the habit. Viewed thus, habits are conditions of possibility for perception, but at the same time they narrow down the space of understanding because they will eliminate a certain number of phenomena as irrelevant. A habit expresses a kind of understanding, because it comprises a way of relating to the world. To have a habit is to have acquired a perspective on the world. Habits interact in a complex fashion. Without habits the world would not appear to be meaningful, because habits connect the world together into a whole against which individual things can stand out as meaningful. This also means that the habits we have influence our view of a series of phenomena that are apparently not so closely linked to them.
My hypothesis is that fear is in the process of becoming such a habit. By this I am not so much thinking of strong, overwhelming fear but rather of what could be described as low-intensity fear, although this habitual nature also applies to phobias to a certain extent. The psychologist Isaac Marks, who is one of the world’s leading theorists within the field of fear and anxiety disorders, believes that many phobias are to a great extent acquired. The fear behaviour of a mother or father, for example, could be passed on to their children.

It seems that we habitually focus on what is potentially dangerous in everything we encounter in life. We ought to distinguish between fear as a general disposition and fear as an actual emotion. The person who is genuinely afraid of heights is not the person who stands trembling next to you close to the edge of a roof but rather the person who will do anything to avoid every kind of high place. We could say that the latter has so profound a dispositional fear of heights that he or she systematically does everything possible to avoid any situation where fear could manifest itself as an actual emotion. Different situations where we feel fear feel different. The feeling of fear is not always the same – it varies not only in intensity but also in quality. The fear of getting mixed up in a fight has a different quality from the fear of falling off a ladder. The distant fear of being infected by an illness that is rampant in a different part of the world is different in nature from the fear of being struck down by a direct physical injury here and now.

In studies of fear, the emotionally intense variant is the type most often emphasized. The type of fear that is predominant in our culture is, as mentioned, more what could be referred to as a low-intensity fear, a fear that surrounds us and forms a backdrop of our experiences and interpretations of the world. It is a fear that has more the nature of a mood than an emotion. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes about what he called a ‘diverted fear’, a fear that is nei-
ther due to being directly confronted with a threatening object nor to one previously having been exposed to such an object. It is rather a fear that manifests itself as a feeling of uncertainty, a feeling that there are possible dangers that may strike without warning and that the world is an insecure place. It is fear as a way of looking at the world, where one’s own vulnerability is considered above all.