

THE CAUSE AND CONTENT OF EMOTION IN JAMES AND PRINZ

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Abstract

William James is widely known for having claimed both that (1) emotions are caused by the bodily changes that follow from unmediated perceived events and (2) they are feelings. In its naive form, the Feeling Theory claims that emotions are akin to sensations that lack intentionality. While James' words occasionally encourage this interpretation, it is inconsistent both with the core claims he makes and with the fact that, stripped of intentionality, emotions would have no positive role to play in the explanation of behavior. As such, it is more plausible to ascribe to James a perceptual theory of emotion whereby they are not only caused by the bodily changes that immediately follow perceived events but are also about those very changes. Jesse Prinz has attempted to refine James' theory. While emotions may register bodily changes, he maintains that they do not represent those changes. Instead emotions represent values. For example, when one suddenly sees a snake, the perception will immediately arouse one's autonomic nervous system which in turn will give rise to fear. It is by registering one's increased heartrate, tensed muscles and shortness of breath that the emotion represents the property of danger. In this paper I raise several problems for Prinz's account by questioning both the assumption he shares with James that emotions are caused by unmediated perceived events and his intriguing distinction between registering and representing.

Keywords: emotion, feeling, representation, content, James, Prinz, value

1. INTRODUCTION

William James is widely known for having claimed both that (1) emotions are caused by the bodily changes that follow from unmediated perceived events and (2) they are feelings. In its naive form, the Feeling Theory claims that emotions are akin to sensations that lack intentionality. While James' words occasionally encourage this interpretation, it is inconsistent both with the core claims he makes and with the fact that, stripped of intentionality, emotions would have no positive role to play in the explanation of behavior. As such, it is more plausible to ascribe to James a perceptual theory of emotion whereby they are not only caused by the bodily changes that immediately follow perceived events but are also *about* those very changes. Jesse Prinz has attempted to refine James' theory. While emotions may register bodily changes, he maintains that they do not represent those changes. Instead emotions represent values. For example, when one suddenly sees a snake, the perception will immediately arouse one's autonomic nervous system which in turn will give rise to fear. It is by *registering* one's increased heartrate, tensed muscles and shortness of breath that the emotion *represents* the property of danger. In this paper I raise several problems for Prinz's account by questioning both the assumption he shares with James that emotions are caused by unmediated perceived events and his intriguing distinction between registering and representing.

2. JAMES VS. COMMON SENSE

In "What is an Emotion?", William James famously declares:

Our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to bodily expression. My thesis on the contrary is that *the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of existing fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.*" (James 1884, pp. 189-190)

He goes on to elaborate using the examples of sadness, anger and fear:

Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike.... The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. (*Ibid.*, p. 190)

In this way, both the nature of emotions and their normal causal sequence is identified. Emotions are essentially feelings which, rather than being caused directly by the perception of an emotion-eliciting event, as common sense suggests, are caused by physiological changes (e.g. elevated heart-rate, muscle tension, and blood flow), expressive behavior (e.g. crying and smiling) and even intentional actions (e.g. striking and running) that directly follow from the perception of an event.

Several clarifications should be made. First, while James identifies both expressive behavior and intentional actions as causes of or influences on emotion, his emphasis is on unseen bodily changes (Cornelius 1996, p. 63). It's, broadly speaking, the physiological or "visceral" changes that primarily determine the emotion one has. This is not to say that outward manifestations of emotion in the form of facial expressions and even deliberate actions cannot shape or influence what we feel. In his "Gospel of Relaxation" he advises his audience that in circumstances where one has lost one's cheerfulness, a promising way of regaining it is to smile and behave cheerfully (James 1912, p. 201). And this, of course, reflects his advocacy of what has come to be known as the Facial and Behavioral Feedback Hypotheses.

Second, just what James means by "standard emotions" is not entirely clear. The qualification (viz. "standard") is obviously meant to indicate that there are exceptions, viz. that some emotional experiences might differ with regards to their causal sequence. On James' model the perception causes the physiological change without any cognitive mediation. It's not clear, however, that complex emotions such as love, guilt or pride could be elicited without some cognitive mediation. Moreover, even so-called "basic emotions" such as sadness, anger and fear don't require an actual perception to be elicited. I might suddenly be seized by fear not because of the perception of a coiled snake but because of my memory of an encounter I had with a snake, or because of a dream or my imagination, suggesting a cognitive interloper. Moreover, some things that we fear, e.g. exams, can be caused by the perception of an exam booklet, but the booklet unto itself is not the thing we fear. What we fear, viz. the exam, is intimately connected with numerous beliefs concerning its difficulty and what we have riding on it (Prinz 2004, pp. 21-22). But, while there may be countless examples of emotions that involve belief, James and his followers seem to suggest that these standard cases reveal to us the essential or paradigmatic causal sequence and nature of an emotion.

Whether non-standard instances of emotions might be something other than feelings is less clear. Contemporary neo-Jamesians such as Antonio Damasio and Jesse Prinz maintain that some emotions might not be feelings simply because bodily changes might go undetected, making it possible to have unconscious emotions (Damasio 1994, Prinz 2004, pp. 201-205). But, in the case of conscious emotions, emotions are feelings caused by bodily changes including biochemical changes in our brains, which Damasio refers to as the "internal milieu" (1999, pp. 47-48). In fact, according to Damasio, there are cases where the brain sets up an "as-if loop", which elicits a felt emotion in the absence of bodily changes (1999, p. 280).

Although these amendments suggest a narrower and more refined thesis, James' standard emotions are nevertheless considered paradigmatic by neo-Jamesians as they reveal to us the unadulterated or essential nature of emotion, viz. they are feelings arising from bodily changes elicited directly by perceptions. What interests me here is just what properties, if any, these feelings have.

3. FEELINGS ABOUT WHAT?

If an emotion is a feeling *caused* by a bodily change, what is a feeling? The "Naïve Feeling Theory" regards

feelings as purely qualitative mental states that lack intentionality. On this interpretation, while feelings might be caused by the body, they are neither the same as the body, nor are they about the body, nor are they about anything else. Emotions, then, are akin to sensations like itches, tingles and pains which were for a long time regarded as "brute facts", viz. members of a metaphysical class that are beyond explanation. Sure, one could say "I have this or that feeling," but beyond this first-person perspective, there wasn't much else to say.

Several problems face the Naïve Feeling Theory of the Emotions. First, emotions are commonly regarded as *about* things. It's intuitive not just to describe an experience of sadness as involving a feeling, but to describe this feeling as *of* or *about* something. Similarly, my anger and sadness, my pride, guilt and love, each has a directedness or aboutness. This seems true not only of emotions but of most, if not all, mental states, viz. that they have intentionality, which Brentano regarded as "the mark" of the mental (Brentano 1973). (It may even be that the qualitative character of emotions can ultimately be explained by their intentional character, as Michael Tye has proposed in the case of pain (Tye 1997).)

The second problem relates to the rationality of emotions. In effect, by regarding emotions as brute facts, the Naïve Feeling Theory not only denies that emotions have intentionality, it denies that they can be justified or otherwise appropriate (or inappropriate) to a situation (de Sousa 2013). For example, if seeing a snake causes me to feel fear, I can justify my fear by citing its proximity, its coiled posture and fixed gaze on me as justifications for my fear.

Moreover, the Naïve Feeling Theory further fails to acknowledge the role emotions play in explaining behavior. Rather than justify action, emotions as mere feelings could at best excuse involuntary or irrational behavior, in the way a large wave might explain one's loss of balance and being swept ashore but not one's reason for coming ashore. Proponents of the Naïve Feeling Theory, thus, unsurprisingly are among the first to deny the positive explanatory value of emotions. Without intentionality, emotions couldn't figure into intentional explanations in a positive way.

If emotions, then, are feelings with intentionality, what are they *about*? James suggests a ready answer to the question. On his view, an emotion is a feeling *of* physiological changes that are caused by perception. The basic claim is "*that the bodily changes follow directly [from] the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion*" (James 1890, II, p. 449). In other words, perceptions cause physiological changes which in turn cause feelings *of* these physiological changes, e.g. *of* crying, *of* trembling lips, *of* shortness of breath, and/or *of* an increased heart rate. For James, then, it isn't just that "emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable", but that the emotions "are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes" (*Ibid.*, p. 452).

There is some ambiguity in James' expression "constituted by, and made up of." Is it the emotional *state* or the emotional *content* that is constituted by and made up of bodily changes? I take it that James means the latter for the following reason. James clearly identifies emotions with "feelings *of* bodily symptoms," "feelings *of* bodily symptoms" or "feeling *of*... [bodily] changes," which suggest the latter. But, in the very same sentence, he maintains that "if I were to become corporeally anaesthetic, I should be excluded from the life of the affections, harsh and tender alike, and drag out an existence of merely cognitive or intellectual form" (*Ibid.*, pp. 452-453), which might be taken to claim that emotional *states* are physiological. Yet, this latter reading is at odds with his insistence that "the general causes of the emotions are indubitably physiological" (*Ibid.*, p. 449; also see pp. *Ibid.* 450, 453). If an emotional *state* (that is a *feeling*, or in this context we might say, event or experience) were a physiological change, it wouldn't be caused by the physiological change with which it's identified--an event cannot be causally related to itself. Moreover, James nowhere says that an emotional state is a physiological change that was caused by another physiological change, which might be a way of saving the 'state interpretation.' In fact, he's adamant about describing emotions as "*sensational* processes... due to inward currents set up by physical happenings", a view that he hesitates to call "materialistic" (*Ibid.*, p. 453).

There are two problems, however, with this interpretation of the intentionality of emotion according to Prinz. The first concerns evolution and the question he asks, "Did evolution furnish us with emotions in order to carry information about our viscera, faces, and skeletal muscles?" (Prinz 2004, p. 59). Prinz is doubtful about this, as he denies that any clear survival advantage is conferred on individuals who are reliably able to detect their own bodily changes. While sympathetic to his doubt here, there may in fact be cases where being aware of the state of one's body (e.g. a raised heart-rate, shortness of breath) may prevent one from over-exerting oneself, which could be detrimental to one's well-being let alone fatal (Hills 2008, p. 726). Yet with that said, it nevertheless does seem odd to suggest that the survival advantage of fear is fully explained by its ability to represent internal bodily changes. Surely, fear is evolutionarily useful because of what it represents outside of an individual.

The second problem has to do with the role of emotions in decision-making and the explanation of behavior. For

example, upon seeing a coiled snake a few feet from me, my fear causes me to spring back in an attempt to distance myself from the serpent. My fear thus partially explains why I sprang back. But if fear is a feeling about the body, how does *that* serve to explain my action? It is odd to suppose that it's because I had a feeling of an elevated heart-rate, shortness of breath, etc. that I sprang back. Surely, it's my fear's representation of something outside of me rather than my bodily changes that explains my evasive action.

The straightforward alternative, then, is to suggest that my fear represents something external to me. For example, if I see a snake in my house, my fear is *of* the snake, or a fear *that* I will be bitten by the snake. It is a representation of the snake's being in my house that explains why I spring back in an attempt to prevent myself from being bitten. In fact, one might suggest that the content of the eliciting perception is the same as the content of the corresponding emotion to which it gives rise. Thus, on a broadly Jamesian view, my perception that a coiled snake is in striking distance from me gives rise to physiological changes, which cause a feeling *of* a coiled snake being in striking distance from me, which ultimately causes me to spring back in an attempt to put more distance between me and the serpent.

While intuitive, Prinz rejects this proposal as well (2004, p. 61). The first problem is that it fails to explain why some individuals who perceive a coiled snake before them don't feel fear of a coiled snake and others do not. The range of things that I fear such as snakes, heights, and nuclear proliferation might differ radically from the range of things that you fear such as bears, falling stockmarkets and an early death. And the second problem is the proposal fails to explain what the diverse set of things that I fear have in common. What do snakes, heights and nuclear proliferation share? What do bears, falling stockmarkets and an early death have in common? Prinz is convinced that an adequate account of the intentionality of emotion should offer some kind of answer to this question.

4. FEELINGS ABOUT VALUE

Prinz's alternative draws on a scholastic distinction revived by Anthony Kenny (1963), which distinguishes particular objects from formal objects. A formal object is the *property in virtue of which* the emotion is elicited, whereas the particular object is merely a thing (object, event, state of affairs) that causes the emotion-eliciting perception (and is the thing that that perception represents). For example, while the coiled snake causes the perception of the snake that gives rise to fear, the formal object in the case of fear is the value of threateningness or danger. And it is danger, the property in virtue of which fear is elicited, rather than the snake (particular object) that fear represents (Prinz 2004, p. 62). In the case of emotions, the formal object is invariably a value. While fear represents danger, sadness represents loss, anger represents a demeaning offense against me or mine, guilt my transgression of a moral imperative, and so on. In fact, in spelling out these values, Prinz suggests using Richard Lazarus' "core-relational themes" as an initial guide (1991, p. 122).

Thus, several problems are seemingly addressed. First, evolution has selected emotions like fear, sadness, anger and guilt for us, as a species, because of their usefulness in representing values like danger, loss, and so on. The representation of these values is useful for human survival, as well as the survival of our primate cousins among many other animals. So, if you can't represent danger, you're likely going to be wounded, killed or eaten, which may prevent you from reproducing and passing on your genes. And why do I run when I see a snake and you don't? I run because I represent danger, while you don't run because you don't represent it. And finally, why can such a diverse set of things elicit the same feeling of fear (e.g. snakes, heights and nuclear proliferation)? Answer: because my feeling of fear represents danger in each of these cases.

I'm sympathetic to Prinz's proposal. Unlike mental states like perceptions, beliefs, and memories, emotions have *valence*. Where fear and sadness are inherently negative, happiness and pride are inherently positive. Moreover, emotions seem to have an evaluative character about them. It isn't just that fear and sadness represent things in the world negatively, but each represents the world negatively in a certain way: the former represents danger, the latter loss. But, to suggest as Prinz does that it is only danger that fear represents and not the particular object, e.g., the coiled snake is problematic. For if emotions, in particular James' "standard emotions," are to adequately explain behavior in virtue of what they represent, appealing to their representation of value alone is insufficient. The problem is that individuals will behave differently depending on what their perception represents. For example, the perception of a coiled snake elicits in me a feeling of fear, which causes me to spring back (out of range of the serpent's strike). By contrast, the perception of an approaching bear which similarly elicits fear may cause me to run, whereas the perception of a steep drop at a building's edge which elicits fear may cause me to inch back from the building's edge very slowly. If these, then, are instances of "standard emotions", emotion unmediated by cognition, how are the different behavioral responses explained? If fear just represents danger, the representation of danger unto itself cannot explain this behavioral diversity.

I suspect that Prinz would reject such a simplistic summation. Emotions, while they certainly serve to explain

behavior (insofar as they are causes of behavior), in the examples I've offer, the emotion doesn't work alone. Emotions in such cases work in concert with other mental states to cause and therefore explain the behavioral response in question, viz. jumping back from a coiled snake that one suddenly sees. Surely one would have to appeal to beliefs and other cognitive states or evaluations! While certainly available to Prinz, it's doubtful that he'd regard such an option as acceptable to anyone espousing an unadulterated Jamesian model of emotion, as he is clearly committed to (Prinz 2004, pp. 45-50).

Several other problems face Prinz, ones I'll mention only briefly here. First, the perception that gives rise to an emotion must involve concepts. A concept I take it enables one, among other things, to recognize the particular object of one's fear. Without recognizing a snake as *snake*, a bear as *bear*, or a steep drop as *steep drop*, the snake, bear or steep drop is unlikely, without being subsumed by the concept (what else could a cognitive active be?!) to elicit fear. And second, with that said, is it the perception that gives rise to the emotion or is it a perceptual belief. Surely, if I doubt what I'm seeing to be a snake, bear or steep drop, if I didn't believe it, the thing wouldn't elicit a feeling of fear.

Third, in defending his view that emotions represent value, Prinz rejects a response-dependent account of values like danger or loss. A response-dependent account maintains that danger is a secondary property like red. For example, something has the property of being red if and only if it elicits the experience of redness in normal viewing conditions. Similarly, something is dangerous if and only if it elicits the feeling of fear in normal conditions (Prinz 2004, pp. 61-66). It isn't just that the objections Prinz cites for rejecting such an account are unpersuasive, but his motivation for adopting a non-response-dependent account, for adopting a teleosemantics in which he considers values to be real essences like H₂O is quite baffling (see Pugmire 2006 and Düringer 2009).

Such concerns deserve a more detailed discussion, one that spells out more carefully Prinz's position and my own objections to his unique semantic analysis of emotion. In the space remaining, I'll briefly outline an alternative.

5. CONCLUSION

A more promising account of what emotions represent, I believe, begins with a reinterpretation of Kenny's particular/formal object distinction. Emotions represent particular objects, e.g. my fear represents a coiled snake. But, as I've argued elsewhere (Gunther 2003, Gunther 2004), emotions violate the force/content distinction. In the case of mental states, e.g., the force/content distinction states that a change in a mental state type doesn't not imply a change in mental content. For example, I might *believe* that there is a snake under my couch, or I might *hope* that there is a snake under my couch, or I might *doubt* that there is a snake under my couch. Although belief, hope and doubt are different mental force types, they have the same content, as they do in the examples just cited.

This I maintain is not the case for the emotions. Emotions violate the force/content distinction, suggesting that *fear* that a snake is under my couch, *anger* that a snake is under my couch, or *sadness* that a snake is under my couch actually have different contents (from one another as well as from mental states like belief, hope and doubt). How do they differ? While I might perceive a coiled snake under my couch, my fear of the coiled snake represents not only the snake but the way the snake seems to me in fear, viz. as *dangerous*. Hence the representation of the snake is *evaluatively* presented. My fear represents the coiled snake as *dangerous* (or *dangerously*); my anger represents the coiled snake as a *demeaning offence* (or *offensively*); and my sadness represents the coiled snake as a *loss*. In other words, emotions represent particular objects evaluatively (formally).

I suspect that a more complete account of such evaluative representation will require a response-dependent framework and cite concepts and cognitive preconditions. But such details will have to be developed elsewhere.

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