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Coping with Choices to Die

This book examines the reactions of the friends and family of those who elect to die due to terminal illness. These surviving spouses, partners, relatives, and friends, in addition to coping with the death of a loved one, must deal with the loved one's decision to die, thus severing the relationship. C. G. Prado examines how reactions to elective death are affected by cultural influences and beliefs, particularly those related to life, death, and the possibility of an afterlife. Understanding the role of these cultural influences on the grieving processes of survivors is a crucial step in allowing them to accept both intellectually and emotionally the finality of elective death and to deal with the decision of their loved one.

C. G. Prado is professor emeritus of philosophy at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. His most recent publications are *Starting with Descartes* (2009), *Foucault's Legacy* (2009), *Choosing to Die: Elective Death and Multiculturalism* (2008), and *Searle and Foucault on Truth* (2006).

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There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that
is suicide.

Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to
answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*
(New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 3

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Foreword

Emotions, Feelings, and Thoughts

Wesley Boston

There are three principal ways to approach an understanding of emotions. One is the philosophical approach, an attempt through conceptual analysis to identify the essence of what emotions are. The second is the psychological approach, which attempts to identify and trace the roles emotions play in peoples' thought and behavior. Philosophers may also draw on the psychological approach for insights to understand the mental mechanisms at play. Different from the philosophical and psychological approaches is the third or neurobiological approach to understanding changes in the brain and body that help to explain emotional experience. The aim of this brief, synoptic account of emotions, and the feelings they cause, is to draw together central insights from these three perspectives to facilitate the treatment of feelings and emotions in the chapters that follow.

THE NEUROBIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Most researchers agree that six primary or basic emotions can be identified: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. Fortunately, today much is known about what happens in the brain and body when one or another of these primary emotions is being experienced. The process is initiated by a stimulus that serves as an adequate inducer. Such a stimulus activates that part of the neural system having to do with emotion.

The system that is activated is composed of both developmentally primitive and more recently evolved areas of the brain.¹ It includes the hypothalamus, the structure at the base of the brain having to do with autonomic control of vegetative functions of the body, such as heart rate; phylogenetically older areas of the cerebral cortex that lie deep within the central part of the brain (the paleocortex); and phylogenetically newer areas at the surface of each brain hemisphere: the prefrontal or orbitofrontal lobes of the neocortex. The system also includes an almond-shaped collection of brain cells lying deep within each hemisphere (within each temporal lobe) called the amygdala, which plays a key role in modulating emotional stimuli. The amygdala receives signals from the hypothalamus and from the paleocortex, and sends signals both back to the hypothalamus and paleocortex and also to the prefrontal areas of the neocortex. In this way the nuclei of the amygdala are involved in the rapid activation of the body's autonomic response to an emotional stimulus, in linking this rapid and unconscious bodily response to the conscious appreciation of its effects on the body, and to the cognitive evaluation of its significance. The integrated collection of both phylogenetically ancient and recent neural tissue that is activated by an emotion-evoking stimulus is known as the limbic system.

One fundamental aspect of the bodily (autonomic and musculo-skeletal) response to an emotion-evoking stimulus is that it is faster than conscious awareness of the bodily changes that occur or the conscious interpretation of these changes. Experimental data suggest that bodily responses to an emotion-evoking stimulus (change in heart rate, muscle tone, secretion of hormones, and mental alertness) are modular and relatively independent of higher cognitive processes.² Such a response is also described as an automatic appraisal mechanism that is informationally encapsulated. Moreover, it generally occurs before a belief has been formed and thus the response is referred to as demonstrating the primacy of affect over cognition. As Paul Griffiths observes, bodily responses to an emotion stimulus are

¹ Iverson, Susan, Irving Kupfermann, and Eric R. Kandel, 2000. "Emotional States and Feelings." In Eric R. Kandel, James H. Schwartz, and Thomas M. Jessell, eds. *Principles of Neural Science*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

² Griffiths, Paul, E. 1997. *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 91–97.

“mechanisms for saving us from our own intelligence by rapidly and involuntarily initiating essential behaviors” that may be life-saving.³

The multiple bodily changes that occur are mapped in the cerebral cortex but not all are raised to consciousness. Antonio Damasio defines the cortical mapping of bodily changes as *feelings*, which, when raised to conscious, he calls “the feeling of a feeling.”⁴ Damasio contends that it is helpful to restrict the term “emotion” to those physiologic changes in brain and body evoked by an emotion stimulus, and to reserve the term “feeling” to name the private mental experience of an emotion. This understanding makes feeling first-person and only subjectively observable, whereas aspects of an emotion, such as changes in facial expression, are observable by others. I suggest that making this distinction between feeling and emotion is a crucial step toward a clearer philosophical understanding of both feeling and emotion. I turn now to the philosophical approach.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Philosophical theories of emotion have generally divided into two broad categories: propositional-attitude theories, also called belief-desire or cognitive theories, in which emotions are viewed as psychological events best explained in terms of beliefs and desires; and feeling theories that hold that “emotions are introspective experiences characterized by quality and intensity of sensation” and that “the identity of the emotion depends on this quality.”⁵ The view that has dominated philosophical thought and writing has been one or another variant of the propositional-attitude or cognitive theory, and the tendency has been to either ignore or discount the role of feelings. For example, Robert Solomon holds that “feelings are never sufficient to differentiate and identify emotions,” and Stephen Leighton wrote that “feelings are at best a typical accompaniment to emotions.”⁶ Charles Taylor did acknowledge the relevance of feelings

³ Griffiths 1997, 95.

⁴ Damasio, Antonio, 1999. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 31.

⁵ Griffiths 1997, 2.

⁶ Solomon, Robert, 1980. “Emotions and Choice.” In Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. *Explaining Emotions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 251–82, 254;

by describing an emotion as something that is experienced or felt about an object or situation, but he insisted that to call the experience an emotion the feeling must be grounded in the judgment about why the object or situation is important.⁷

Peter Goldie is critical of philosophers who either ignore the role of feelings in emotions or regard them merely as “add-ons.” He writes that “without feelings emotions would not be what they are” and that belief-desire accounts of emotion “do not do justice to the fundamental importance of feelings in emotional experience.”⁸ The kind of feeling that Goldie regards as central to emotional experience is feeling that is directed toward the object of the emotion. He calls it “thinking of with feeling” or “feeling towards.” He distinguishes feeling towards from bodily feelings, which, for Goldie, are quite simply conscious awareness of changes in one’s body. Goldie also argues that thinking of with feeling or feeling towards is distinguishable from believing and not reducible to a combination of believing and desiring, so that an emotion can occur in the absence of a relevant belief. Moreover, he argues that thinking of with feeling or feeling towards is a particular way of grasping the object of an emotional experience that adds content to the thought that is “not fully describable in words.”⁹

A question that philosophers ask is whether the folk-psychology concept of emotion constitutes a single object of knowledge or if emotions are merely imposed interpretive categories of little significance. There seems to be a consensus that, as noted, six primary (also called basic or “affect program”) emotions can be identified. Each can be described as a coordinated set of changes that constitute a particular emotional response, a response that is complex (incorporates musculoskeletal, organ function, and hormonal changes), automated (changes are involuntarily triggered by the emotion-evoking stimulus), and coordinated: “a stereotypical response involving several body systems.”¹⁰ These so-called primary emotional responses are generally believed to have evolutionary origins.

Leighton, Stephen, 2003 “Introduction.” In Stephen Leighton, ed. *Philosophy and the Emotions: A Reader*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 12.

⁷ Taylor, Charles, 1973/1985. “Self-Interpreting Animals.” *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, I, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45–76.

⁸ Goldie, Peter, 2000. *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 50.

⁹ Goldie 2000, 61.

¹⁰ Griffiths 1997, 230.

However, the common understanding of emotion also includes phenomena such as shame, jealousy, guilt, and pride, as well as anger that persists for a month or a year without being continuously felt. Moreover, these distinctive and sustained psychological processes may not have immediate and stereotypical behavioral and physiological consequences. Additionally, they appear to be highly integrated with complex, often conscious cognitive processes. These more complex processes are referred to as secondary, social, or higher cognitive emotions and they are interpreted as irruptive patterns of motivation that may deflect a person from a goal derived by means-end reasoning, a matter highly relevant to what follows in the body of this book.¹¹

The question that arises at this point is whether higher cognitive emotions are similar to or distinct from primary emotions. The neurobiological view is that a shared biological core underlies all emotional phenomena. An opposing philosophical view is that higher cognitive emotions are so different from primary emotions that they constitute a separate and distinctive psychological category and that the common understanding of emotion as of a single sort should be replaced by one having at least two distinct categories.

EMOTION AND THOUGHT

In addition to whether emotions are best understood in terms of one or more typical categories, another question posed by philosophers is how an emotionally held thought is to be distinguished from a feelingless belief or desire, or how an affective mode of awareness, that is, feeling, is to be distinguished from nonemotional processing of knowledge. Differently put, how is the dichotomy between thought and feeling best explained? As noted, feeling may be defined neurophysiologically as the conscious experience of the mental representation of alterations in bodily state that occur in the having of an emotion and so understood, feeling is inherently self-conscious. In Goldie's account of emotional feeling, which he calls feeling towards, the self-awareness of bodily change is directed at the object or state of affairs that induces the emotion. It is the particular way of grasping the salience of the object of the emotional experience that adds

¹¹ Griffiths 1997, 243.

content not fully describable in words. It is a primitive grasping of the situation in which primitive refers to both phylogenetic and cognitive mechanisms.

One widely accepted philosophical account of a thought, understood as the objective content and not the process of thinking, is that it is something sharable.¹² On this view, thought is an abstract content that can be an object for one or more minds. In contrast, a feeling towards, as understood by Goldie, is a special kind of awareness. It is thinking of or about something but from an individual's nonsharable point of view. Thinking of with feeling or feeling towards, C. G. Prado suggests, is what individuates a thought, what makes it one's own thought.¹³ This take on feeling, and specifically on feeling towards, broadens the concept of feeling put forward by Damasio from that of an inward awareness of changes in bodily state felt as a specific emotion such as fear, to an inwardly directed awareness and an outwardly directed special awareness of the object of emotion. We may say that feeling raised to consciousness is the linking in consciousness of changes occurring in the body with a special awareness of the emotion-evoking object or situation in the environment. It is uniquely personal, directed at once inwardly and outwardly, and nonsharable. It is how some aspect of the world is for the person.

This account fits readily with primary or affect program emotions, but does it also square with higher cognitive emotions in which stereotypical behavioral and physiological consequences seem not to be in evidence? One example of a higher cognitive emotion is shame, such as may come from failure to maintain a moral standard. It will occur in a person with aspirations to dignity, one who can feel her dignity threatened or undermined, and for whom the word "shameful" has meaning. It is an emotion that the person experiences in relation to her existence as a subject and may be called a self-referring emotion. It is also language-dependent and, as Charles Taylor avers, allows for "a fuller and richer articulation of feeling."¹⁴

¹² Frege, Gottlob, 1892. "On Sense and Reference." In Peter Geach and Max Black, translators, eds. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Blackwell Press, 62.

¹³ Personal communication.

¹⁴ Taylor 1985, 56.

It seems undeniable that feeling is involved in such an experience of shame even though there may be no discernible behavioral or physiological manifestations of what is being felt. It is also undeniable that the feeling is highly integrated with cognitive activity that may lead to long-term planned action. How is feeling to be understood in this case?

It is now known that in some emotional responses the physiological changes that occur are confined to the brain, to alterations in neural mapping that to consciousness feel like bodily changes but may not represent actual changes in body landscape. Damasio calls this the “as if body loop.”¹⁵ The person burdened by shame may feel physically dragged down even though there are no recognizable changes in bodily disposition. Based on the most recent findings in neuro-imaging studies of emotion, however, it seems reasonable to predict that further refinements in the technology will confirm that there are functional changes in the limbic system of the brain, and possibly in other organ systems as well, when a higher cognitive emotion is being experienced.

Emotions have been described as “the function where mind and body most closely and mysteriously interact,” as spanning the divide between mind and body, even as casting doubt on that distinction.¹⁶ I suggest that by understanding the physiological changes that occur in both brain and body as “emotion,” and the conscious awareness of these changes as “feeling,” and thereby recognizing that emotion and feeling are two sides of the same coin, we better comprehend the intimate relation of mental and physical. When Damasio’s physiologic understanding of feeling is merged with Goldie’s philosophic understanding of what he calls feeling towards, we better appreciate the combination of conscious awareness of changes in body landscape with heightened awareness of an object or state of affairs in the world and the import of that combination. I suggest that it is this intricate interaction that enables us to be thinking, reaching human beings and that it is what is at the heart of our humanity.

¹⁵ Damasio 1999, 69, 80.

¹⁶ de Sousa, Ronald, 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, xvi; Goldie, Peter, and Finn Spicer, 2002. “Introduction.” In Peter Goldie, ed. *Understanding Emotions: Mind and Morals*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 3.

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