

[illegible]

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Introduction

This course investigates certain philosophical questions concerning the nature of emotions.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss basic philosophical questions concerning the nature of emotions
- discuss some of the philosophical literature on this subject by William James
- understand problems concerning the nature of emotions and discuss them in a philosophical way.

1 Introduction: a picture of emotion

Hedley is a rational sort of person. He never jumps to conclusions: when he needs to make up his mind about something, he considers all the evidence available to him, and if he is still not certain, he keeps an open mind. His desires are as careful and considered as his beliefs: if he has good reason to suppose that something is worth having or doing, then he wishes to have or to do it. He does not nurture whims or yearn for impossibilities. He is not weak-willed or impulsive. His actions invariably reflect what he judges to be best for him to do, once he has considered all the options.

Hedley's brother Hartley is just the opposite. Hartley is completely at the mercy of his emotions. He rushes to judgement, noticing only those aspects of the situation that are relevant to his current emotional state. As a result, his beliefs are frequently unreasonable and inconsistent. His desires and his actions are equally wayward, driven entirely by whatever he happens to feel at the time. He cannot stick to a plan, as he cannot resist the emotion of the moment. His impetuous behaviour is frequently followed by bitter regrets. Neither Hedley nor Hartley sound like real people. Nobody is as rational as Hedley or as emotional as Hartley. Still, these two caricatures can be used to illustrate a particular conception of the nature of emotion and its relation to rational thought and action. You may not find that this conception matches your own, but it is a view that is often unthinkingly assumed, and it has had a significant influence on the way in which emotions are portrayed in contemporary western culture.

On this view, human beings contain two separate sources of action – a rational self, represented by Hedley, and an emotional one, represented by Hartley. Reason is regarded as unemotional and emotion is regarded as operating outside reason, perhaps even in opposition to it. When people picture themselves in this way, it is generally the rational element that they would like to be in charge: to describe someone as 'being emotional' is not usually a compliment. Of course, very few people would wish to be like Hedley, completely without emotion; such a person could not react with spontaneous joy to a friend's good news, or with spontaneous sympathy to a friend's misfortune. Emotions have their place, but in most situations, it is thought, emotion should be kept under control.

One of the goals of philosophical inquiry is to understand and to examine critically commonsense pictures of this kind. We might start by trying to provide a more precise characterisation of the picture of emotion that I have just described. Clearly, this view of emotion centres on a contrast between emotion and reason, but one that involves a number of different elements.

First, reasoning is regarded as a form of *activity*: in central cases at least, it is held to be something that we do, and which is under our control. We choose to focus on a problem, to search for more evidence, to settle on a decision, and so on. In contrast, emotions are viewed as involuntary occurrences: emotions are things that happen to us, rather than things we do. Indeed, people are sometimes said to be 'overcome' or 'carried away' by their emotions, as if emotions are not part of us at all, but forces that assail us from outside, disrupting the normal pattern of our lives. On this commonsense picture, then, reason is regarded as active, while emotion is viewed as passive. (This is one reason why modern philosophers often use the old-fashioned word 'passion' when they are talking

about emotions: the word 'passion' comes from the same ancient Greek root as the word 'passive,' and can reflect a view of emotions as things that happen to us.)

Secondly, reasoning is a mental or psychological activity. (This need not imply that reasoning is an activity performed by an incorporeal mental entity. Perhaps mental activities are identical with processes that occur in the brain.) Our emotions, in contrast, are associated with changes that occur elsewhere in our bodies: sweating, changes in heart rate, decreased salivation and so on. In everyday talk, people sometimes locate emotions in their stomach or their heart, rather than their head.

Thirdly, emotional behaviour is contrasted with behaviour that is reasoned or considered. To describe someone as acting in a reasoned way is to imply that they have thought about what to do – they have weighed up the relevant considerations, and chosen the action that seems best in the light of all the evidence. In contrast, emotional behaviour is regarded as impulsive or impetuous: emotions push us to act, disregarding considerations that point to other options.

This picture of the relation between reason and emotion centres on a series of contrasts:

- 1 Reason as active – emotion as passive.
- 2 Reason as belonging to the mind – emotion as bodily.
- 3 Reason as our true self – emotion as an external force.
- 4 Reasoned behaviour as considered – emotional behaviour as impetuous.
- 5 Reason as controlling – emotion as in need of control.

Taken together, these contrasts might suggest that emotions constitute a more primitive psychological system, one that we share with other animals and with very young children. In contrast, reason is regarded as separating humans from other animals, and adults from infants.

How can we assess this picture? We will begin by trying to get clear about what an emotion is. As we will soon discover, this question is highly controversial.

2 The 'What is...?' question

2.1 Philosophy and science

We will consider some different attempts to answer the question 'What is an emotion?'. Because we shall often need to refer to this question in what follows, I shall call it the '*What is...?*' question. Before we investigate some of the ways in which philosophers have attempted to answer it, we should consider what an answer might look like.

What might a scientific answer to the 'What is...?' question tell us about emotion, for example, those offered by neurophysiologists and psychologists? A neurophysiologist might answer the 'What is...?' question by explaining how emotional occurrences are realised in patterns of activity in the brain and nervous system. A cognitive psychologist might investigate how emotions influence the way in which we think and act. These scientific accounts can be tested by experiment; in addition, they can be assessed in the light of established theories about how the brain works, and about how people think and

behave. How does a philosophical answer to the 'What is...?' question relate to these scientific accounts of the nature of emotion?

A standard way to answer this question is to say that, while science is concerned to describe and explain the way in which the world actually works, the role of philosophy is to take a step back – to analyse and to criticise the assumptions that underlie our everyday beliefs and our scientific theories. Sometimes it is suggested that the primary concern of philosophy is to understand the concepts that we use in describing and explaining the world: to give an account of our concept *emotion* is to explain what counts as a case of emotion, for example, by identifying some feature that all cases of emotion have in common. But we might also expect a philosophical account of emotion to tell us something about the broader body of beliefs and assumptions that underlies our everyday talk about emotions – as I attempted to do in section 1. Not all these beliefs and assumptions are concerned with what an emotion is or bear on our concept of emotion. Nevertheless, they help to determine how we think and talk about emotions. Some philosophers refer to this broader set of beliefs and assumptions as our 'conception' of emotion (Johnston 1987, p. 60–1). In what follows, I shall use the term 'conceptual question' rather loosely to refer both to questions about concepts and to questions about conceptions.

What kinds of question might a philosopher ask about our conception of emotion? First, they might set out to provide a *descriptive* account; that is, they might set out to describe what we ordinarily conceive an emotion to be. An account of this kind should enable us to recognise the kinds of assumption that we are making when we describe someone as experiencing an emotion, and to understand how these assumptions fit together with other very fundamental beliefs that we tend to share – for example, beliefs about the nature of rationality or freedom.

Once these assumptions have been made explicit, it is possible to criticise them. We might find that our conception of emotion is rather untidy – smudging distinctions that it would be helpful to draw. More radically, we might find that it is nonsensical, or that it fails to cohere with other fundamental assumptions that we make about ourselves or the world. In this situation, a philosopher might take a step further, and offer a *revisionary* account – suggesting ways in which we should modify our conception of emotion, in order to highlight certain distinctions or to eliminate any inconsistencies.

This is not the only basis on which a philosopher might develop a revisionary account. A philosophical account of the emotions might set out the conception of emotion that we ought to adopt if we are to conceive of emotions in the way empirical investigation shows them to be. An account of this kind will answer not only to conceptual considerations but also to the evidence of everyday experience and current scientific theory. It may lead us to the conclusion that we need to revise some fundamental assumptions about the nature of the emotions. Indeed, in extreme cases, such an account may imply that we ought to jettison our concept of emotion altogether.

What this shows is that the answer to a conceptual question can sometimes depend on the answer to an empirical question. But the relationship between empirical and conceptual questions can also run in the opposite direction. I can best explain this with an example. Suppose that a documentary programme is advertised as follows. 'In the middle ages, many people suffered from demonic possession. Now Professor X explains what demonic possession is!' Intrigued, you make time for the documentary. On the programme, Professor X explains that people who were thought in the middle ages to be possessed by demons were in fact suffering from a form of schizophrenia. Perhaps you are satisfied by the explanation. Even so, you may feel that the advertisement for the

programme rather overstated the case. Professor X did not explain what demonic possession is. Rather, Professor X has explained something else, that is, why certain people were once thought to be possessed by demons. Indeed, rather than saying what demonic possession is, the professor's explanation implies that there is no such thing as demonic possession.

But why should we resist the claim that Professor X has shown that demonic possession just is a form of schizophrenia? The problem is that our concept of demonic possession rests on certain assumptions – for example, the assumption that there are malevolent beings that are capable of controlling our actions. This is not to say that our concept could not be modified a little; but there are limits to the extent to which a concept can be modified before it becomes unrecognisable. At the very least, it might be thought that the concept of demonic possession implies control by an external agent. If so, schizophrenia is just not the right sort of thing to be demonic possession.

In the same way, if someone offers an answer to the 'what is...' question, we can ask whether they have offered an account of what emotion is, or whether they have given us an account of something else – perhaps even an account that implies that there is no such thing as emotion. Once again, this need not imply that our concept of emotion cannot be revised a little. But to count as an answer to the 'what is...' question, an account must characterise emotion in a way that is at least recognisable, given our everyday concept.

If this is right, conceptual questions and empirical questions are not always independent of each other. Nevertheless, they are different kinds of question. In what follows, I shall assume that, broadly speaking, philosophical inquiry aims to answer conceptual questions, relying primarily on reflection and argument; while scientific inquiry aims to answer empirical questions, and does so by appealing to experimental evidence.

However, this distinction between philosophy and science needs to be softened in two ways. First, it should not be taken to imply that philosophy and science are two quite independent enterprises, which can proceed in isolation from each other. As we have seen, scientific theory provides one way to test the adequacy of our unreflective conception of emotion. Conversely, philosophical reflection on our concepts is not always an end in itself, but can be used as a tool, helping to provide a framework in which scientific investigation can take place.

Secondly, in actual practice, these boundaries are not treated as sacrosanct. Sometimes, the earliest attempts to propose an empirical account of a phenomenon are very general in nature, and try to make progress by piecing together clues from everyday experience, as well as what little experimental work has been done. In this situation, it is not uncommon for a philosopher to suggest a speculative empirical account. Conversely, scientists often raise and discuss conceptual questions as they develop their theories.

As we shall see, not all the theorists that we will encounter characterise their projects in quite the same way. We will need to bear this in mind while investigating their accounts, and especially when we assess the objections that they make to each other.

2.2 Identifying emotions

The question 'What is an emotion?' is a question about emotions in general. But it is impossible to address this question without being aware that there appear to be many different types of emotion. One way to start is to consider a range of states and to identify which states we would naturally classify as emotions, and which we would naturally classify as states of some other kind. This will put us in a better position to see whether

there are any common features that link different types of emotions and differentiate them from states of other kinds. At this stage, we are relying on our everyday, unreflective conception of what counts as an emotion: but we are not committed to the view that our initial classification is completely uncontroversial, or that it is immune to revision in the light of further reflection.

Activity 1

Look through the following list:

anger	nausea
hunger	love
fear	disgust
jealousy	cowardice
being startled	joy
feeling cheerful	nostalgia
sadness	

Divide the items on the list into three categories:

- 1 States or occurrences that you think are emotions.
- 2 States or occurrences that you think are not emotions, but something else. In this case, note down what sorts of state you think these might be. For example, you might prefer to categorise some of these as moods or as bodily feelings, rather than emotions.
- 3 States or occurrences that you are uncertain about.

There is no agreed way to divide up the items on the list. But just about everyone would regard anger and fear as emotions. For that reason, I shall use them as examples throughout this discussion. Sadness, joy and disgust are also fairly uncontroversial instances of emotion.

In contrast, most people would deny that hunger and nausea are emotions. They seem to be sensations or feelings caused by changes occurring in the body. In what follows, I shall refer to sensations of this kind as 'bodily feelings'; bodily feelings need to be distinguished from the bodily changes that generate them: to experience a bodily feeling is to feel some change occurring in one's body. The distinction between bodily feelings and emotions is not altogether clear cut. Emotions do seem to involve bodily feelings: we say that someone feels a stab of fear, a surge of anger, or a flutter of joy. This might make us wonder how nausea differs from disgust.

On the face of it, being startled does not look like an emotion. It seems to be a reflex action: a sudden noise or movement triggers a stereotypical response, including a characteristic facial expression and a change in posture. But the startle response has some important features in common with states that we would naturally classify as emotions. In particular, some emotional responses – changes in facial expression, for example – are quick and involuntary in the way that the startle response is. Jennifer Robinson argues that we should view startle as a very primitive kind of emotion – a

precursor of fear or surprise (Robinson 1995). If you do not agree, you might ask yourself why: in what way does the startle response differ from an emotion?

There appears to be a distinction between emotions and moods. But the precise nature of this distinction is unclear. Moods involve feelings that are similar to emotional feelings in important ways. But we typically characterise moods as lasting longer than emotions. Moreover, moods do not focus on a specific object or event in the way that emotions seem to do. If I am in an angry mood, I tend to get angry at anything and anyone. If this is right, it would seem appropriate to treat feeling cheerful as a mood rather than an emotion: when someone is feeling cheerful, they tend to feel happy about everything that is going on around them.

The distinction between a character trait and an emotion seems rather clearer. A character trait is a settled tendency to respond to certain situations with certain emotions or a tendency to give into a certain emotion when it is not justified or appropriate to do so. Most people would regard cowardice as a character trait rather than an emotion.

Love might be regarded as a standard case of emotion. But it can be argued that love is not an emotion, but what has been termed an *emotional attitude*: that is, a tendency to feel different emotions about, for example, a certain person, depending on the circumstances – you might feel pride if a loved person has some success, fear or anger if they are threatened, sadness if they die.

Again, jealousy looks like a paradigm case of emotion. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that jealousy can also be the name of a character trait. Moreover, it might be suggested that jealousy is not an emotion in its own right, but a complex of fear and anger felt in response to the infidelity or perceived infidelity of another person. A similar suggestion might be made about nostalgia. We might regard nostalgia as an emotion in its own right or we might regard it as a mix of emotions, involving sadness and pleasure, felt in the context of certain kinds of thought about the past.

Emotions, then, might be distinguished from bodily feelings, reflex responses, moods, character traits and perhaps more complex states involving a number of emotions. But it is not always easy to identify the source of these contrasts.

2.3 Essential properties and central cases

What should we expect a finished answer to the 'What is...?' question to look like? It might be suggested that we should answer this question by identifying a set of features that are shared by all uncontroversial cases of emotion – for example, cases of anger or fear – and that are not shared by psychological occurrences of other kinds – for example, hunger or cowardice. Once we have identified these features, we will be able to refer to them to decide any controversial cases. An account of this kind will not just act as a test: it would make explicit the distinctive character of emotional occurrences.

It is sometimes possible to identify a set of properties that are shared by all the members of a certain category. For example, members of the same chemical kind will share the same chemical constitution: all (pure) samples of aluminium are made up of atoms that contain 13 protons; and no samples of metal that are not aluminium are made up of atoms of this kind. But it is not always possible to find a set of properties that are shared by all the members of a certain kind. For example, a cold is an acute viral infection of the upper respiratory tract, involving a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, sore throat, watery eyes,

coughing, headache, and so on. But not all colds are caused by the same virus, and not all colds involve exactly the same set of symptoms. Some particularly nasty colds do involve all the symptoms listed here, but other viral infections will count as colds provided that they involve some of the symptoms mentioned on the list: as a result, two people may count as having a cold, even though their symptoms are different.

This suggests that we cannot take it for granted that it will be possible to find a neat answer to the 'What is...?' question. Indeed, it might be suggested that we have very good reasons to suppose that we will not be able to do this. Think about the list of emotions that you made earlier: perhaps it included anger, fear, jealousy, love, disgust, joy and nostalgia. Faced with this apparently motley collection, it might well seem unreasonable to expect to find a set of features that they all have in common. As Amelie Rorty puts it, emotions may not form a 'natural class' (Rorty 1980, p. 1).

It need not follow from this that we cannot make progress in answering the 'What is...?' question. First, there may be some very broad characteristics that all emotions share. For example, perhaps all emotions are psychological states or occurrences. This in itself does not tell us a great deal; but it does at least tell us something. Moreover, it may be possible to identify a little more precisely what kind of psychological state emotions belong to. For example, perhaps all emotions are desires; or perhaps they are all bodily feelings.

Secondly, there may be some characteristics that are not common to all emotions, but that are shared by some particularly central examples. Compare the example of a cold: arguably, colds characteristically involve a blocked or runny nose. Similarly, it might be suggested that there are certain features that are shared by central cases of emotion.

So, even if, in the end, the 'What is...?' question cannot be answered with a single neat formula, this is not to say that it cannot be answered at all. Emotions may belong to some particular category of psychological state; and there may be some specific features that are shared by central cases of emotion. This seems to be enough to justify the attempt to find an illuminating answer to the 'What is...?' question.

2.4 Components, causes and effects

In this section, I shall say a little more about the shape that we might expect an answer to the 'What is...?' question to take. In particular, I would like consider some different claims about the way in which an emotional occurrence is related to other types of occurrence.

Here is a story.

Larry is told by his manager, Bella, that the project that he has been working on for months has been shelved: all his hard work has been wasted. Larry hears Bella telling him the news as she lounges behind her expensive desk. His brain begins processing the information. His heart rate speeds up and his face flushes. He can feel his heart racing and his face burning. He clenches his fists. He is sure that Bella would not have treated any other employee in this way, and he feels a strong desire to throw a chair at her. He calls her something unprintable, kicks her wastepaper bin and strides out of her office. He cannot settle to work that afternoon: he continues to pace up and down, muttering to himself; eventually, he writes a letter of resignation.

Most people would infer from this description of events that Larry is angry. Still, on the face of it, nothing explicit has been said about Larry's emotional state. Instead, we have been given a very complex description, involving a number of different elements.

- 1 *An eliciting event or situation:* Bella tells Larry that his project has been shelved.

- 2 Larry's *perception of the eliciting event*.
- 3 The subsequent *processing* of the information. Some of this may take place at a non-conscious level: for example, perhaps Larry is not consciously aware of Bella's posture, but that information might influence how he responds to what he has heard.
- 4 Certain *bodily changes*: these include both *internal changes*, for example, an increase in heart rate; and *expressive behaviour* that communicates his emotion to other people, for example, the flushing of his face.
- 5 Larry's *feeling those bodily changes*: he feels his heart racing, his face burning.
- 6 Larry's *judgement* of the significance of this turn of events: he judges that Bella has treated him badly.
- 7 Larry's *desire* to retaliate in some way.
- 8 Larry's *voluntary actions*: he swears at Bella; he kicks her bin; he writes a letter of resignation.

How do all these different elements relate to Larry's anger? It seems natural to suppose that some of them, at least, are either *causes* or *effects* of his anger.

Activity 2

- 1 Select one item on the list that you would identify as a cause of Larry's anger.
- 2 Select another item that you would identify as an effect of his anger.

Answers to these questions may vary. But the eliciting event certainly looks like a cause: we would find it natural to say that Larry is angry *because* Bella has told him that his project has been rejected. Again, most people would suppose that Larry's voluntary actions are effects of his anger: he swore at Bella, kicked her bin and later wrote a letter of resignation *because* he was angry.

Are all the items on the list causes or effects of Larry's anger? It might be suggested that a certain item on the list is not merely a cause or effect of Larry's anger, but is actually identical to it. For example, it might be suggested that Larry's anger is identical with the changes that take place in his body as he hears that his project has been rejected. This would imply:

A An occurrence of emotion is a set of bodily changes.

Again, it might be suggested that Larry's anger is a complex occurrence made up of a number of components – for example, the bodily changes mentioned above, together with the judgement that Bella has treated him badly. This would imply:

B An occurrence of emotion is a complex event, made up of a set of bodily changes together with a judgement (of a certain kind).

Alternatively, it might be suggested that Larry's anger could not be identified with any of the items on the list: it might be regarded as an occurrence of a distinctive kind, which occurs in addition to the bodily changes, feelings, judgements and desires mentioned in the story. This would imply:

C An occurrence of emotion is a psychological event of a distinctive kind.

As it stands, C is not very informative; but it could be made more informative by saying more about the type of occurrence in question. (I shall come back to that in a moment.)

Activity 3

Look again at the story about Larry and the list of elements mentioned in the story. Do you think that any of these elements are identical to or are components of Larry's anger? Or do you think that Larry's anger is something in addition to the elements mentioned on the list?

You may not have settled views at this stage; but even if your views are vague or uncertain, write them down so that you can refer to them later.

According to A and B, the changes that occur in Larry's body as he hears the bad news are either *identical to* or else *components of* his emotion. The other items of the list are either causes or effects of it. But it might be suggested that some of these causes and effects have a special status, that is, they are *necessary causes* or *effects* of Larry's anger. What this means is that the bodily changes (say) that Larry undergoes will not count as anger unless they are caused in a certain way, or unless they have certain effects.

A comparison might help here. What makes it appropriate to describe a burn as a case of sunburn? The answer is that sunburn has to be caused in a certain way: that is, by exposure to the sun. A burn that has been caused in some other way will not count as sunburn, no matter how similar it is in appearance or effect. Exposure to the sun is a necessary cause of sunburn. Similarly, someone might hold that, while Larry's anger is identical with certain bodily changes, those changes will not count as an occurrence of anger unless they have been caused in a certain way, for example, by the judgement that he has been badly treated. On this view, the judgement is not a component of Larry's anger, but it is a necessary cause of it. This would give us the following account:

A* An occurrence of emotion is a set of bodily changes that have been caused by a judgement (of a certain kind).

Notice the difference between A* and B: according to B, the judgement is a necessary component of anger; according to A*, it is a necessary cause.

This suggests one way in which it would be possible to make an account like C more informative: it might be claimed that anger is a distinctive kind of occurrence that has certain necessary causes and effects. Once these had been specified, we would have an informative account of the nature of anger.

Activity 4

Look once again at the story about Larry and the list of elements mentioned in the story. Look at the elements that you did not identify as either identical to or as components of Larry's anger. Would you wish to say that any of these elements are necessary causes or effects of his anger?

Again, your views at this stage may be vague or uncertain; but write them down so that you can refer to them later.

Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that any account might be presented as setting out features that are shared by, and distinctive of, all cases of emotion; or it might be viewed as applying only to central cases, allowing for the possibility that some states count as emotions not because they share these features, but because they are similar to states that do.

In what follows, we shall consider a number of different answers to the 'What is...?' question. None of them is identical to the examples that I have used in this section, but they take similar forms. Along the way, we will need to consider a number of questions about emotion. Here are some key questions to think about as you proceed:

In what sense, if any, is an emotion a feeling?

Could you experience an emotion without undergoing any kind of bodily change?

Can your emotions conflict with your judgements?

Can your emotions conflict with your desires?

In what ways (if at all) can emotions be controlled?

3 Emotions as bodily feelings

3.1 William James

In 1890, the philosopher and psychologist William James published his influential work *The Principles of Psychology*. The book included a chapter on the emotions, in which James advanced a bold new thesis about the nature of the emotions. James's thesis has had an enormous influence on subsequent debate.

Reading 1 is a short extract from James's chapter on the emotions. In the passage that precedes this extract, James castigates earlier psychologists who have written on the subject. According to James, these writers have concentrated on providing minute descriptions of particular types of emotion, without offering any account of emotion in general. In contrast, James proposes to offer a general theory, from which some universal principles can be derived. James presents his account as hypothetical – that is, as a speculative account, that draws on everyday experience, but which is still in need of proper empirical proof. However, he also contrasts his account with what he takes to be our ordinary conception of emotion, implying that our ordinary conception needs to be modified in certain ways.

James begins by discussing what he terms the 'coarser' emotions: these are the emotions that nearly everyone believes to involve recognisable bodily changes. The examples he gives include grief, rage and fear. Later in the chapter, he will turn his attention to the 'subtler' emotions – the emotions elicited by the aesthetic properties of a work of art, the intellectual qualities of a mathematical proof, or the moral qualities of another person.

Activity 5

Read the extract from James's chapter (Reading 1).

[Click to open William James's chapter](#)

- 1 What does James believe to be our 'natural way of thinking' about the emotions?
- 2 What, in contrast, does he claim emotions to be?
- 3 What reason does James give for supposing that his thesis is correct?

Note: It would be easy to answer these questions by finding the relevant sentences in the extract and underlining them (particularly easy in this case, since James italicises crucial sentences). But once you have identified James's answers to these questions, try to express what he is saying in your own words, or draw a diagram.

- 1 According to James, we naturally think that an emotion is a state which is caused by our perception of some eliciting event and itself causes certain bodily changes.
- 2 According to James, what we naturally think is incorrect: it would be more accurate to say that our perception of some eliciting event causes bodily changes which we then feel: our feeling those bodily changes is an emotion. In other words, emotions are bodily feelings, in the sense defined earlier. (See Figure 1.)
- 3 James suggests that his theory is supported by the fact that we never find an emotion occurring without the subject feeling bodily changes. This, James suggests, is the distinction between feeling fear and dispassionately judging that the situation is dangerous.

What an emotion is: what we naturally think



What an emotion is: James's view

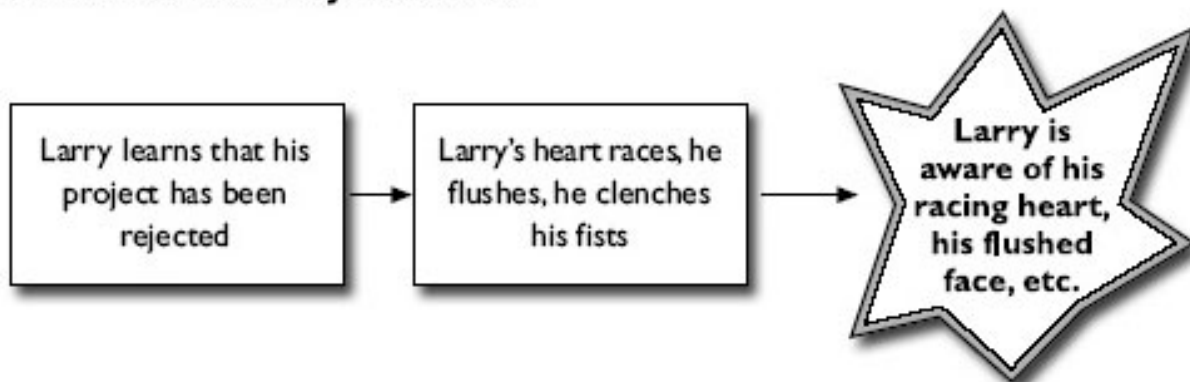


Figure 1 Emotions and bodily feelings. In each case, the emotion is represented by the

'splash' box. The arrows represent causal links

James presents his account as a corrective to our ordinary conception of emotion. He believes that empirical enquiry will reveal our ordinary conception to be misplaced, and presents an alternative view that, he believes, is more likely to fit the facts. Nevertheless, there are some ways in which James's account could be viewed as endorsing the intuitive picture of emotion that I set out earlier on. In particular, James emphasises the bodily nature of emotions: it is their bodily nature that differentiates them from dispassionate judgements. However, James does not claim that emotions are located in the body: on James's view, emotions belong in the mind – they are the feelings produced by bodily changes, not the bodily changes themselves.

James goes on to suggest that everything he has said about the 'coarser' emotions will be true of the 'subtler' ones too: even in the case of the subtler emotions it is impossible to regard the subject's response as an emotional one unless we are assuming that they are feeling bodily changes of the required kind.

In all cases of intellectual or moral rapture we find that, unless there be coupled a bodily reverberation of some kind with the mere thought of the object and cognition of its quality; unless we actually laugh at the neatness of the demonstration or witticism; unless we thrill at the case of justice, or tingle at the act of magnanimity; our state of mind can hardly be called emotional at all. It is in fact a mere intellectual perception of how certain things are to be called – neat, right, witty, generous, and the like.

(James 1950, pp. 470–1)

3.2 Understanding James's account

James's thesis is striking, but there are some issues that need to be clarified. Before going on to assess James's argument for his thesis, I will explore his position by raising three questions about his account.

First, what kinds of bodily changes are required for an emotion to take place? James mentions three kinds of change:

- (a) internal changes (increase in heart rate)
- (b) involuntary expressive behaviour (weeping)
- (c) voluntary actions (striking).

Some of these events seem more closely connected to the emotion than others. It is one thing to claim that I could not feel my racing heart, tensed muscles and flushed face without being angry; it is less plausible to claim that I could not feel myself striking someone without being angry. After all, it is quite possible to strike someone in cold blood.

Secondly, what is the relation between the emotion and the subject's perception of the eliciting event? In the Reading, James seems to suggest that the emotion and the perception of the eliciting event are quite separate. On this view, it would be possible to experience an emotion without having perceived any eliciting event. This interpretation is confirmed by a later passage in which James discusses 'objectless' emotions. James describes the case of a friend who suffered from attacks of anxiety that appeared to have no external cause. James concludes that 'the emotion here is nothing but the feeling of a

bodily state, and it has a purely bodily cause' (ibid., p. 459). This suggests that James would deny that an emotion is necessarily caused by the perception of some eliciting event: emotions are normally, but not necessarily, caused in this way.

Finally, we might ask whether James is committed to the view that all types of bodily feelings are emotions. Do hunger, nausea, giddiness and pain count as emotions for James? If not, we will need an explanation of why these feelings are not emotions. But it is not immediately obvious what this explanation could be: in all these states, the subject is feeling internal bodily changes; in the case of pain and nausea, at least, they are also likely to be aware of involuntary expressive behaviour and voluntary actions. It is far from clear how these feelings differ from anger or fear, on James's account.

3.3 Emotion, motivation and action

Perhaps one of the most striking features of James's theory is his account of the relationship between emotions and actions. As James points out, this is one aspect of his theory that runs directly counter to our ordinary conception of emotion. Ordinarily, we assume that emotions motivate actions: for example, if someone asked why Larry kicked Bella's bin, we might say that he was motivated by anger – that he did it because he was angry. On James's account, the order of explanation is reversed: according to James, Larry's anger is the consequence, not the cause, of his action. James, then, seems to deny that emotions motivate actions.

This raises the question whether James holds that emotions have any role to play in our psychology, or, alternatively, whether he believes that they are just by-products of the processes that cause behaviour. James says nothing about the psychological role of emotions in the Reading, and he has sometimes been interpreted as denying that emotions have any causal effects. Elsewhere in the *Principles of Psychology*, however, he argues that emotions can affect what we believe: the more emotional significance we attach to a possibility, he suggests, the more we are inclined to believe in its reality (ibid., pp. 307–11). Given that James allows that emotions can influence our beliefs, he would presumably also allow that they can influence our actions indirectly. Nevertheless, his account implies that they have no direct influence on our actions: on his account, emotions are not motivations.

3.4 Cognitive and non-cognitive states

At several points in the Reading, James draws a sharp contrast between emotions and what he terms 'cognitions'. The distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive states will crop up fairly regularly from now on, so I shall pause at this point to make it clear how I am going to understand this distinction. Unfortunately, different philosophers understand the distinction in different ways; I shall introduce two possible interpretations of the distinction.

On one interpretation, the term 'cognition' points up a contrast between *reasoning* or *thinking* on the one hand and *sensing* or *perceiving* on the other. In thinking about our surroundings, we bring beliefs and thoughts together to form a coherent picture of the world; in thinking about our actions, we bring beliefs, thoughts and desires together in order to decide what to do. In this respect, beliefs, thoughts and desires contrast with *perceptual states* – for example, my seeing a giraffe as tall or my hearing it as crunching leaves. My seeing the giraffe as tall provides evidence for the belief that it is tall; but until I have formed that belief, I cannot use that information to draw further conclusions or to

make plans. In this first sense of the term 'cognitive', cognitive states will include any type of psychological state that is characteristically involved in thinking or reasoning: these include beliefs, thoughts and desires, but not perceptual states.

Many philosophers reject the suggestion that there is a strong distinction between perceiving and thinking. They argue that perception involves interpreting sensory data in the light of our concepts and perhaps our beliefs, so that perception should be regarded as a cognitive phenomenon. In contrast, the distinction that I am drawing here rests on the assumption that the kind of interpretation involved in perception is distinct from that involved in reasoning – perhaps because it involves a separate psychological mechanism, which operates in a different way, or uses different sources of information.

On a second interpretation, the term 'cognition' points up a contrast between *belief* and *motivation*. Beliefs and thoughts can be described (very roughly) as representing things as being a certain way: for example, my belief that the giraffe is tall represents the giraffe as being tall. In this respect, beliefs and thoughts contrast with motivational states, such as desires and wishes. Desires and wishes do not represent the world as being a certain way; instead, they represent how the world is desired or wished to be. In this second sense, then, cognitive states will include beliefs and thoughts, but not motivational states.

As we have seen, James contrasts emotions with cognitions. This is not surprising: bodily feelings are not judgements or beliefs. It would be natural to regard them as a form of perceptual state: that is, a perception of changes occurring inside the body. James, then, regards emotions as non-cognitive states.

3.5 Emotions as passions

I have already suggested that in stressing the connection between emotions and bodily changes, James might be seen as endorsing the intuitive picture of emotion that I set out earlier on. James's thesis could also be taken to sanction the view that emotions are passive, involuntary responses.

Perceptual states are often regarded as passive, involuntary states. To say this is to say that we cannot exercise direct control over our perceptual states. If my mouth is full of pickled herring, I cannot decide not to experience the taste of herring; nor can I decide to experience the taste of chocolate instead, no matter how much I might wish to. If this is the correct view of perception, and if bodily feelings are perceptual states, we should expect that they too will not be under our direct control: if my face is flushing and my heart is pounding, I cannot decide not to feel it.

The claim that emotions are passions needs to be distinguished from another claim: this is the claim that we have no control over, and so no responsibility for, our emotions. Sometimes we say 'I can't help how I feel'; and sometimes we attempt to disclaim responsibility for an action by saying that we were 'carried away' by emotion. However, even if it is right to regard emotions as involuntary states, which cannot be controlled directly, this does not imply that they cannot be controlled in any way. We may still be able to control our emotions indirectly, by modifying the perceptions and bodily changes that generate bodily feelings.

For example, on James's account, Larry could try to control his anger by trying not to think about Bella's behaviour, and so damping down the bodily changes that are generating his feelings. Moreover, James argues that it is possible to engender an emotional response by enacting certain forms of expressive behaviour – for example, Larry might try to make himself feel happy by smiling and taking up a more relaxed stance (ibid., pp. 462–6).

These forms of control are limited. In many cases, they can only be used to bring an emotional response under control once it has started, rather than preventing it from occurring at all. Nevertheless, the claim that emotions are passive, involuntary states does not imply that we have no control over our emotions, or that we can never be blamed (or praised) for an emotional response.

3.6 Assessing James's argument

James argues as follows:

- A** It is impossible to experience an emotion without feeling bodily changes.
- B** Therefore, an emotion is a set of bodily feelings.

Activity 6

- 1 Is **A** true of all emotions?
 - 2 How much support does **A** give to **B**?
- 1 James holds that it is impossible to have an emotion that does not involve bodily feelings. Is this true of all emotions? It might be suggested that pride is an emotion that does not necessarily involve any bodily feelings, because it does not necessarily involve any bodily changes: it is possible for someone to experience pride without their heart speeding up or their muscles tensing or relaxing. However, it is important to remember how much James includes within the notion of a bodily change: perhaps pride need not always involve internal changes, but it may be that when we feel pride we do imperceptibly draw ourselves up, and lift our heads. Feeling these slight movements would constitute feeling a bodily change on James's definition. Without these feelings, James will challenge his opponents to differentiate between the emotion of pride and the dispassionate judgement that you have done something deserving of praise.
- 2 It does give some support, but it is clearly not decisive. What **A** would show is that an emotion is at least always accompanied by bodily feelings. But this is not enough to establish the truth of **B**. **A** is consistent with the view that bodily feelings are necessary causes or effects of an emotion. It is also compatible with the view that emotions are complex occurrences, of which bodily feelings are just one component. In order to rule out these other possible positions, James needs to show, not only that emotions always involve bodily feelings, but also that nothing more is required for an emotion to occur.

Nevertheless, **A** is a substantive and interesting claim. It would certainly be possible to deny it. It might be argued that, although we often feel bodily changes when we have an emotion, this is something that merely accompanies the emotion and is inessential to it. James's argument has given us a reason to question this view: can we really explain what an emotion is without giving a central role to bodily feelings?

Conclusion

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