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A Transtheoretical Understanding of the Emotions: On the importance of dialogue between Robert Solomon's cognitive and William James' non-cognitive theories of emotions to create a satisfying and applicable theory

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Individual theories of the emotions tend to isolate themselves from others and in doing so they necessarily lack the strengths of the other theories. The dogmatic spat between cognitive and non-cognitive theories of the emotions, which I explore here, is symptomatic of this insularity. To have a satisfying understanding of the emotions we must acknowledge the strengths and discard the weaknesses of each theory. As such, I argue that it is only through dialogue between theories that we can achieve a strong conceptualisation of the emotions.

The intention of this article is to advocate a dialogue between two differing yet historically influential theories of emotions advocated by Robert C. Solomon and William James. Solomon's theory, explicated in his 'Emotions and Choice'[1], is known as the cognitive theory of emotions. James' theory is a non-cognitive theory of emotions, and is

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[1] R. C. Solomon, 'Emotions and Choice' in R. C. Solomon (ed.) *What is an Emotion?* (Oxford, 2003), 224-235.

advocated in his article from 1884, 'What is an Emotion?'.[2] Both theories have large followings and exponents including Martha Nussbaum, Antonio Damasio, Nico Frijda, Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, and both theories offer important insight into our understanding of emotions. However they both have significant shortcomings which can largely be resolved by looking to the other for answers. As such I advocate a dialogue between theories to go beyond their isolated and unsatisfactory theories in an effort to come closer to a full understanding of emotions; as I call it, a transtheoretical understanding.

Put simply, the cognitive account regards the emotion to be a result of a mental belief on a certain stimulus. Thus the emotion is itself directed at something. The presence of this cognitive process of judgement is what gives the theory its name. This concept of the emotions is found as far back as in Aristotle who likewise uses the term 'judgement'.[3] The non-cognitive account instead considers the emotion to be perception of a bodily feeling, for example an elevated heart rate may tell us we are anxious. For non-cognitive theorists, there is no place for belief, or cognition, in the definition of an emotion. Martin Seligman argues that despite being significantly different, cognitive and non-cognitive theories are not incompatible.[4] Though she favours a mitigated cognitive theory,[5] Martha Nussbaum claims that there is scope for dialogue between both sides; one does not rule out the other.[6] With this basic understanding of each theory and the scope for dialogue and synthesis we must now consider the theories individually.

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[2] W. James, 'What is an Emotion?' in R. C. Solomon (ed.) *What is an Emotion?* (Oxford, 2003), 65-76.
[3] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (London, 2004), 141.
[4] M. Seligman, *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death* (New York, 1975), 62-65.
[5] M. Nussbaum, 'An Interview with Martha Nussbaum' (2004) 11:1 *The Dualist*, 69.
[6] M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2003), 105.

James, who worked in the late 19th Century and collaborated with his contemporary Carl Lange to create the James-Lange theory, argues that emotions are the feeling of physiological changes that are caused by a certain stimulus. He says that 'bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and [...] our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion'.[7] James considered the influence of all bodily changes on the emotion 'including among them visceral, muscular, and cutaneous effects'.[8]

Thus the process goes

1) Stimulus
2) Physiological response
3) Emotions resulting from awareness of physiological response

James sees the cognitive aspect as additional to, but separate from, the emotion. Cognition allows us to judge how best to respond to a situation but in itself cognition is 'pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth'.[9] James writes that 'we might see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike' but these cognitive processes are, for James, non-emotional.[10] James' claim is that a cognitive evaluation is not the emotion because it is without feeling. To demonstrate this James conducted a thought experiment with his readers. He asked:

> What would be left of fear or love or embarrassment, or any emotion if you took away the physiological sensations such as the heart palpitations, trembling,

[7] James, 'What is an Emotion?', 67.
[8] P. Adelman & R. Zajonc 'Facial Efference and the Experience of Emotion' (1989) 40 *Annual Review of Psychology*, 252.
[9] James, 'What is an Emotion?', 67.
[10] Ibid., 67.

> muscle tensions, feelings of warmth or coldness in the skin, churning of the stomach?[11]

In an attempt to demonstrate that physiology composes emotion, James suggests we try to eliminate an unwanted emotion by behaving with 'the *outward motions* of those contrary dispositions we prefer to cultivate'.[12] For example:

> Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must be frigid indeed if it does not gradually thaw.[13]

By controlling bodily changes we can control emotions and this causal relationship demonstrates the link between physiology and emotions as well as the independence of emotions and external stimuli. However this point is contentious and perhaps not representative of James' theory; we do not experience emotions because we act like we would if we were having this emotion. For example we still feel fear even if we act as though we do not: remaining still rather than running from a bear does not entail that we will not be afraid. Some research has been done in this area that may support James here.[14] Likewise, research on the facial feedback hypothesis has shown some effectiveness in changing our emotions by

[11] James, cited in K. Oatley et al (eds.) *Understanding Emotions* 2nd Edn. (Oxford, 2006), 116.
[12] James, 'What is an Emotion?', 73.
[13] Ibid., 73.
[14] For example, see S. Tomkins & C. Izard, *Affect, Cognition, and Personality: Empirical Studies* (New York, 1965), and P. Ekman & E. Rosenberg, (eds.) *What the Face Reveals: Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System* 2nd Edn. (Oxford, 2005).

the changing of our facial expression.[15] Though this may contribute to a theory of emotions I maintain that this is not James' main argument. Indeed it is inconsistent with other, more central, elements of his theory.

Contrary to James, Damasio, a neurologist and biological psychologist, argues rationality is profoundly linked to our emotions. It is our emotions, such as fear, which allow us to act rationally (i.e. in our interest) and run away from the bear. According to Damasio, without emotions such as fear we might act in a way that is counter to our interests.[16] This view is held by other theorists including Lazarus, Keith Oatley, Nico Frijda and Batja Mesquita. Frijda and Mesquita write that emotions 'are, first and foremost, modes of relating to the environment: states of readiness for engaging, or not engaging, in interaction with that environment'.[17] Indeed, emotions 'function to manage our multiple motives, switching attention from one concern to another'.[18] This view of the emotions, as something which we need to interact with the world, is incompatible with James' concept that we might change our emotions dependent on how we act. The idea that emotions are an intrinsic part of our rationality and interaction with the world is strong and must be included in a comprehensive theory of the emotions.

Less debatable is the more charitable account of James' theory: that it is the feeling of bodily changes that is the emotion, rather than behaviour creating bodily feelings and then emotions. Instead of discounting James' theory we must simply query his attempt to demonstrate the link between physiology and emotions.

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[15] For example, see S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (New York, 1962), and Adelmann & Zajonc, Facial Efference and the Experience of Emotion'.

[16] A. Damasio, *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London, 2005), 131.

[17] N. Frijda & B. Mesquita, cited in Oatley, *Understanding Emotions*, 28.

[18] Oatley, *Understanding Emotions*, 253.

Central to James' theory is that all or most emotions have specific physiological correlates, otherwise within this account there is no explanation for subtly different emotions such as fear and anger, embarrassment and shame.[19] By considering the complexities of the autonomic nervous system and by realising the vast number of alternative physiological arrangements within this system it certainly seems plausible that James' theory could be true.[20] However there are some criticisms to be made here and for this I turn to Walter Cannon, the former student of James.

Cannon's first criticism is that the slight changes in salivation, heart rate, sweat response and breathing 'do not carry enough distinct meaning to account for the many distinctions people make in their emotional experience – differences, for example, between gratitude, reverence, compassion, pity, love, devotion, desire and pride'.[21] Cannon conducted studies and concluded that the same physiological changes 'occur in such readily distinguishable emotional states as fear and rage'.[22] Thus James' theory fails to explain differentiation between emotions which we perceive.

Another of Cannon's points is that our physiological responses are slower than our emotional responses.[23] Oatley uses the example of embarrassment, highlighting that 'the blush peaks at about 15 seconds after the embarrassing event' but the feeling of embarrassment occurred closer to the event.[24] James' argument falters yet again.
Cannon also questions our sensitivity to bodily changes. While 'we can feel the thumping of the heart because it presses against the chest wall' this does not entail that we are acutely sensitive to its changes or

[19] R. C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge, 1993), 301.
[20] Oatley, *Understanding Emotions*, 120.
[21] Ibid., 121.
[22] W. B. Cannon, 'From Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage' in Solomon, (ed.) *What is an Emotion?*, 80.
[23] Ibid., 81.
[24] Oatley, *Understanding Emotions*, 121.

respond emotionally to these changes.[25] Indeed more recent studies have found that people are only faintly aware of their heart rate activity.[26] Furthermore some autonomic components are utterly without feeling according to tests on the guts where they have been 'cut, torn, crushed or burned in operations on unanaesthetized human subjects without evoking any feeling of discomfort' and along with not noticing this the subject did not experience emotional changes during these experiments.[27] The evidence and arguments seem conclusive against James' reliance on subtle alterations of our physiology as determinate of emotions.

However a convincing alternative to James' version of non-cognitive emotional theory has recently been formulated. Damasio argues that, as with James, the emotion begins with a stimulus or 'inducer of emotion' (though at this stage we are emotionally unconscious of it, for what Damasio calls the emotion is yet to occur). Next the signals resulting from processing the stimulus activate parts of the brain that are preset to respond in a certain way depending on the type of stimulus encountered. These parts of the brain are called 'emotion-induction sites'. Their activation triggers a number of responses in the brain and the rest of the body. The feeling of this 'full range of body and brain responses… constitutes emotion'.[28]

With Damasio's findings we can relocate the physiological element of James' theory to the brain. This relocation counters Cannon's first criticism: within the brain there are more intricate and sophisticated devices that may distinguish between similar emotions such as embarrassment and shame. The rapid response of the brain also counters Cannon's original criticism that the body was too slow to explain the sudden onset of emotions. Cannon's final criticism also is not applicable: our brain responding to stimulus will create responses that we are sensitive to. Indeed that is the purpose of this brain

[25] Cannon, 'From Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage', 81.
[26] Oatley, *Understanding Emotions*, 121.
[27] Cannon, 'Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage', 81.
[28] A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, (London, 2000), 283.

function: to make us respond in an appropriate manner to the situation, as with Damasio's previous argument linking emotions and rational responses. This response includes emotional responses such as fear and anger.

Crucially though, this modern alternative to James' theory demonstrates that the *feeling* of an emotion is at least in part a physiological, specifically neurological, reaction rather than a cognitive judgement. However it is not just neurology which influences the potency of the emotion. This is demonstrated well by Robert Winston who discusses spinal injury patients with no feeling below the neck. They still experience emotions, suggesting physiology is not the only component, but these emotions are not as intense as before their injuries.[29] Clearly neurology and wider physiology must be accounted for in a strong account of the emotions. Nonetheless James' theory relies too heavily on physiology as determinant of emotions as Cannon showed.

Turning now to Solomon's cognitive theory of emotions, I must start by explaining what he considers an emotion to be. Solomon argues that the emotion is the cognitive process of judgement on a stimulus. Thus emotions are intentional, by which I mean they are 'about something'.[30] This, he claims, is fundamental to all emotions. Every emotion has an object because it is that object which they are judgements of. Without an object there can be no emotion. To demonstrate this, Solomon gives the hypothetical example of someone called John stealing his (Solomon's) car. The emotion results from two things. Firstly Solomon is certain that John has stolen his car (this belief is the object of the emotion). Secondly there is the judgement that this theft is an injustice. The feelings caused by this belief are what the emotion is. In the case of perceived injustice, as with the example given, the emotion felt is anger.

[29] R. Winston, *The Human Mind* (London, 2003), 192).
[30] Solomon, *The Passions*, 111.

Solomon is angry at the certain *belief*, rather than the objective fact, that John has stolen his car.[31] When my subjective knowledge of the object changes, even if in objective reality there has been no change, then my emotion will do so too. Upon learning that his car has never left his garage, Solomon will cease to be angry. Note here the stark contrast between Solomon and James who, as mentioned above, believes emotions to be wholly removed from beliefs about an object. Solomon's account seems far more convincing in this regard. He is correct to acknowledge the primacy of the subjective experience rather than objective fact in forming an emotion.

Our emotions are dependent on our normative beliefs because 'an emotion is a basic judgement about our Selves and our place in our world, the projection of the values … according to which we live and through which we experience our lives'.[32] Thus emotions are judgements that we make. For example anger is the judgement that we have been wronged; we perceive injustice to have been done. If we do not believe to have been wronged, say by John having stolen our car, then we will not feel angry. Clearly emotions are linked to what we consider important; they are linked to our ethical practices and social norms. For example if we do not believe in property rights then we would not have a strong emotional response to them being broken. It is important though that we realise Solomon does not consider these judgements to be contemplative; we do not ponder whether to feel anger about the theft of our car, instead judgements are 'undeliberated, unarticulated, and unreflective'.[33] Indeed he considers these judgements to be as commonplace as the thousands of judgements we make every day, such as 'reaching for the light switch, glancing at the clock, turning off the fire under the scalding cappuccino – perceptual judgements, aesthetic judgements, even moral judgements, that are never "thought about"'. [34]

[31] Solomon, 'Emotions and Choice', 225.
[32] Solomon, *The Passions*, 126.
[33] Ibid., 131.
[34] Ibid., 131.

For Solomon we have responsibility for these judgements:

> Since normative judgements can be changed through influence, argument and evidence, and since I can go about on my own seeking influence, provoking argument, and looking for evidence, I am as responsible for my emotions as I am for the judgments I make.[35]

According to Solomon, because we are capable of changing our judgements we are responsible for them and consequently for our emotions. If I go out looking for evidence to the contrary that John stole my car and I find this evidence by checking that the car is in the garage and has been there all night, then I will no longer feel angry. By accepting responsibility for my involvement in my own emotions, and then acting to alter them in a way that I desire, I can choose my emotions. Solomon says that with our emotions 'we are like infants who for months watch our legs bobble before us, and then we discover that we ourselves are doing the bobbling'.[36]

But what if John actually has stolen my car? If I judge this to be wrong I will feel angry. Simple understanding of emotions as judgements does not draw the conclusion that the subject controls that emotion. Here Solomon wrongly ignores other factors in our judgements. Our judgements and values result from a series of influences and are largely, though not irrevocably, entrenched, certainly within the time span of the felt emotion. We cannot choose to deem something right or wrong. While we can choose, over a period of time, to adjust our attitude towards something such as property rights, Solomon over-stresses our ability to control our judgements. It might take years or decades to remove a deeply engrained value system and while we may choose to move away from it, successful results are far from instantaneous and in some cases it

[35] Solomon, 'Emotions and Choice', 232.
[36] Solomon, *The Passions*, 132.

might not be achievable. This is not acknowledged by Solomon and this is a clear weakness in his account.

A strength of Solomon's theory is that it attempts to allow for the complexities of emotions by focussing on the individual's experience of them. While non-cognitive theories do this to an extent, Solomon allows much more for individual experiences of emotions. Solomon's theory is based on the fact that we are all unique individuals, each making different judgements and thus feeling different things in response to the same events. James' theory does not allow for this. Indeed there is nothing to make my own personal feeling of fear or love particular to myself if we all have the same physiological responses. What Solomon attempts to do is allow space for individual differences, and indeed cultural differences, in perceptions of reality in his approach to understanding emotions. He realises that emotions 'are not concerned with the world but with *my* world'.[37] Solomon here shares similarities in his approach as the existential psychotherapist Rollo May who insists we must 'discover the person, *the being to whom these things happen*'.[38] This subjective realism, acknowledging an objective external world but also an individual perception of it, is in contrast to James who seems to objectify the individual experience of emotions into a mechanical process rather than something personal and individual. Solomon's approach seems more considerate of individual perception and this is clearly preferable.

Although he accepts that bodily feelings tend to accompany emotions, Solomon insists that this feeling is not the emotion. He says that 'emotions may typically involve feelings... but feelings are never sufficient to identify or to differentiate emotions, and an emotion is never simply a feeling'.[39] He also describes bodily feelings: '[They] are always there, take the shape of the emotion, but just as easily move

[37] Ibid., 19.
[38] R. May, *The Discovery of Being* (London, 1983), 10.
[39] Solomon, *The Passions*, 99.

from one emotion to another'.[40] While there is association, bodily feelings are not a part of emotions. And yet, as Winston highlights, our bodily feelings alter how strongly we feel an emotion. Physiology does alter how an emotion *feels*. Ignoring it to the extent that Solomon does is misguided. Though his basis of separating objective from personal experience of the world is a strong one, he reacts too strongly against a theory that rightly places a part of our own feeling of an emotion in our objective reality, that of our body. Indeed consider an argument with a roommate or partner. Though the issue may be resolved (such as a dispute over who does what housework), thus meaning the object of the emotion is gone, we may still feel angry at the other. The physical, non-cognitive elements of an emotion remain – such as high levels of adrenaline. We feel the residual emotions of anger after the object has ceased to be. Thus the cognitive element has gone but the non-cognitive element remains. This contradicts his statement that bodily feelings can 'easily move from one emotion to another'.[41]

As with James, Solomon's account is too narrow. Solomon focuses too much on cognitive elements and is reluctant to accept the importance of temperament and personality traits and biological influences including instincts on emotions. Both theories are too insular and, by distancing themselves from the other, each isolates itself from important aspects of the emotions. Their failure in creating successful narrow accounts of emotions demonstrates that a complex conceptualization of emotions from a hybrid of perspectives including biological, psychological and social phenomena should be attempted, such as that done by Loyal Rue.[42]

To summarise, James' theory lacks subtlety, scientific grounding and any relation to the particular subjective *feeling* of emotions connected to the object of the emotion. However he is correct to give

[40] Ibid., 97.
[41] Ibid., 97.
[42] L. Rue, *Religion is Not About God* (London, 2006), 79.

consideration to the role of the physiological aspect of emotions, as demonstrated by Winston. Also debate around James' theory has lead to some key components of a theory of the emotions being researched and established. Solomon alternately, owing to the importance he obdurately places on subjective experience, gives us a more nuanced account which bears greater relation to the emotions we feel. Though he is wrong to draw such strong conclusions about our choice of emotions, his incorporation of judgements and objects within his theory is clearly a significant improvement on James' theory. And yet in his efforts to fix the gaps he sees in James' system, Solomon ignores the strong elements of the non-cognitive account of emotions, thereby creating a similarly deficient theory.

What this shows is that taking a strong conceptual basis for a theory of the emotions (i.e. cognitive/non-cognitive) is a flawed approach to achieving a satisfying theory. There is a lack of modesty in their claims of knowledge and further lack of awareness of the vulnerability of such narrow theories. Alternately, a dialogical approach tacitly acknowledges the likelihood of epistemological and methodological weaknesses in such a difficult area of the philosophy of psychology. Such theoretical modesty allows for progression through dialogue. So, hypothetically, a theory of the emotions would develop from James' original theory, taking into account the findings of Cannon, Winston and Damasio, thereby resituating the non-cognitive elements into parts of the brain rather than the autonomous nervous system, but retaining a physiological element to the theory. That theory would also apply some elements of Solomon's theory, such as the importance given to individual and social differences on the perception of experiences and the feeling of emotions. As a result of a healthy dialogue in which both cognitive and non-cognitive sides would be willing to recognize their own shortcomings a more complete and less flawed theory of emotions can be achieved. Clearly a transtheoretical understanding of the emotions is our best chance of creating a satisfying concept. Without open dialogue between opposing views, and without the willingness to concede defeat on either side, a theory of the emotions is condemned to failure. Dialogue, in this field, is of crucial importance.

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