

# **The Philosophy of Emotion- bodies, judgement, and being in the world**

**Tony Walton**

## **Introduction**

There are a number of views about the nature and role of emotions which this essay will argue against. One is that emotions are basic and unreflective responses to states of affairs which are to be contrasted with considered, reflective and reasoned responses. A second view which is found in some philosophical accounts and within neuroscience is that emotions should be understood as neurophysical events in the body and as such reducible to neuroscientific explanation. This essay will challenge both these approaches by first examining the work of William James on emotion, his view resting on the assumption that emotions can best be understood as bodily responses to events in the environment. Second, the critique of the Jamesian position in the work of Robert C Solomon and Martha Nussbaum will be considered leading to the conclusion that a more extensive account of the nature of emotion is needed than that supplied by neuroscience. Consideration of Solomon and Nussbaum's work will also throw light on why we should not dismiss emotions as necessarily irrational. Third, drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty it will be shown how an adequate account of emotion needs to recognise the role of the body but in a way freed from Jamesian neuroscientific assumptions. It would be overstating the matter to claim that this essay provides a view of Merleau-Ponty which represents some sort of grand dialectical conceptual reconciliation of the previous two competing positions, but it can at least be demonstrated that looking for the combined strengths in apparently opposing positions does have some heuristic value. To that extent the work of Merleau-Ponty can be viewed as bringing together what is valuable in the Jamesian view and in the approach offered by Solomon and Nussbaum.

## **The body and emotions: William James**

The starting point for the analysis offered here is the work of William James. In his 1884 article 'What is an Emotion' James begins by questioning the commonsense view according to which the bodily changes we feel when we experience an emotion follow on from- are caused by- the emotion. For example, if confronted by a bear I feel the emotion of terror which then causes me to shake with fear. James, on the other hand, puts the matter differently: 'My thesis on the contrary is that *the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*' (James 1884 p.188-189). He puts his view clearly when he says 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...' (James 1884 p.190).

In order to defend his thesis James invites us to consider an emotion in the absence of bodily feelings and claims that: 'Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and

deem it right to strike, but we could not actually *feel* afraid or angry' (James 1884 p.190). In short, the essence of an emotion for James is the constitutive bodily feeling.

James further defends his thesis by making empirical claims about how our 'neural machinery' responds to the environment. 'The neural machinery is but a hyphen between determinate impulses to inhibition or discharge within its organs. .... The love of man for woman, or of the human mother for her babe, our wrath at snakes and our fear of precipices, may all be described, similarly, as instances of the way in which peculiarly conformed pieces of the world's furniture will fatally call forth most particular mental and bodily reactions, in advance of, and often in direct opposition to, the verdict of our deliberate reason concerning them' (James 1884 p.190).

## **Cognition and emotion: Solomon and Nussbaum**

In James' account of the emotions there is a good argument and a bad one. The good argument concerns the intimate relationship between emotion and bodily feeling. There is plenty of commonsense and scientific evidence that our emotions respond to our bodies. We can, for example, ease anxiety by going for a stiff walk. Or as James puts it: '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!' (James 1884 p.198). James is surely right to suppose that what is going on with our bodies can affect our emotions.

The bad argument, though, is to suppose that the relationship between body and emotion is devoid of cognition. James' approach creates a hiatus between emotions as bodily feelings and the rest of our thought processes. Moreover, because of that hiatus James is unable to see how our emotions are one aspect of a range of mental processes which should be regarded as inextricably connected with one another. On this alternative view, cognition and emotion are linked. This view has been described as follows by Schachter and Singer: 'An emotional state may be considered a function of a state of physiological arousal and of a cognition appropriate to this state of arousal...It is the cognition which determines whether the state of physiological arousal will be labelled as "anger', 'joy"... or whatever' (Quoted in Brady 2019 p.21).

There are two important points here. The first is that we simply cannot make sense of an emotion without knowing how the emotion connects with our beliefs. We feel anger towards someone because we believe that they have offended us in some way. The belief is a condition of the anger. That is not to say that a person could not be inexplicably angry, but if they are they would be judged as seeing the world in an inadequate way. Being angry for no obvious reason is not part of normal and acceptable human behaviour. Our emotions are, therefore, connected with our beliefs, and they are subject to judgements about standards and acceptability. Emotions do not stand in isolation from the rest of our mental experiences.

The second and related point is that because our emotions are connected with our beliefs they are always *about* something. That is, they exhibit the property of *intentionality*. If I am angry I am angry about something or someone. To explain emotions as simply bodily feelings is to understate the richness of mental experience. Bodily feelings are not *about* anything. They simply exist as discrete experiences. But

emotions are *about* something. To love is to love someone or something. 'Emotions ... seem to be intentional phenomena' (Price 2015 p.18). They are about objects in the world. Furthermore, to love someone is to evaluate that person as in some way important. Thus emotions 'seem intimately connected with evaluations of ... objects' (Deonna and Teroni Routledge 2012 p.6). Emotions are on this view part of a rich and complex set of mental processes involving beliefs and evaluations.

The above view of the nature and role of the emotions has been powerfully articulated by Robert C Solomon (Solomon 1993) in his earlier work on emotion. (As we will see later, he revised his position to take account of the importance of the body). For Solomon, the passions are not a domain of unreflective and irrational impulse. Rather, he favours a 'representation of emotions as our own *judgements*, with which we structure the world to our purposes, carve out a universe in our own terms, measure the facts of Reality, and ultimately "constitute" not only our world but ourselves. Rather than disturbances or intrusions, those emotions, and the passions in general, are the very core of our existence, the system of meanings and values within which our lives either develop and grow or starve and stagnate' (Solomon 1993 p.xvii).

According to this view, the traditional dichotomy between reason and emotion is rejected. Moreover, it is also claimed that it is not reason alone which constitutes our selfhood and humanity, but also our emotions. 'It is our passions, not our reason... that constitute our world, our relationships with other people and, consequently, our *Selves* (Solomon 1993, p.15). Solomon rejects the view that reason should rule the passions, but also rejects the Humean view that reason should be the slave of the passions. 'To divide the human soul into reason and passion.....divides us against ourselves, forcing us each to be defensively half a person, instead of a harmonious whole. There is no problem of reason *versus* the passions. There is only the problem of *who* we are and would be through our passions and on reflection' (Solomon 1993, p.58). The notion that emotions are judgements brings reason and emotion together. For Solomon, emotions are not simply feelings prompted by external stimuli as is the case for James. Emotions are 'conceptual structures' (Solomon 1993, p.60). They express how we see the world, ourselves, and others. In this vein, Solomon is committed to a form of 'rational romanticism'. That is, a view 'in which the "reason-passions" distinction plays no part' (Solomon 1993, p.64).

This view for Solomon is tied to a critique of 'the objective perspective'. This critique of the 'objective' scientific approach forms the basis of Solomon's attack on James. The starting point for that attack is a rejection of the view that an understanding of the emotions can only be gained through the findings of neuroscience; that is, the view that 'the physiology of emotion is primary...' (Solomon 1993, p.91) and that some form of physiological reduction is the best way to explain emotions, a view that relegates our conscious experience of emotions to the status of epiphenomena. 'We are not simply hydraulic mechanisms, voltage cells, or boilers, who happen to have this curious attachment, consciousness - like a galvanometer attached to the cell or a valve on the boiler- that passively registers the pressures within' (Solomon 1993, p.96).

From Solomon's standpoint, therefore, the Jamesian view represents a seriously impoverished account of human experience in general and of emotion in particular. Rather, emotions should be seen as part of our understanding of the world and of

ourselves. They are integral to how we evaluate the world and to the practical actions we choose to pursue. 'Every emotion.... is also a projection into the future, and a system of hopes and desires, expectations and commitments, intentions and strategies for changing our world' (Solomon 1993 p.153).

Like Solomon, Nussbaum rejects the view that emotions are disconnected from the rest of our mental processes. For Nussbaum, emotions are essentially intentional and also intrinsically evaluative. 'I shall argue that emotions always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object's salience or importance; in that sense, they always involve appraisal or evaluation' (Nussbaum 2003, p.23). Nussbaum characterises the view that she is opposing as one in which emotions are seen as 'unthinking energies that simply push the person around, without being hooked up to the ways in which she perceives or thinks about the world' (Nussbaum 2003, p.24-5). Relatedly, she rejects the view - as does Solomon- that emotions are reducible to bodily movements (Nussbaum 2003, p.25).

Nussbaum builds on this argument through exploring the additional point that the way in which our emotions are related to our beliefs and evaluations is shaped by the wider society of which we are a part. That is, our emotions are socially constructed (Nussbaum 2003, p.6 and Chapter 3). She cites examples of how emotions such as grief are very differently constructed within different kinds of societies (Nussbaum 2003, p.139-42).

## **Integrating body and mind: Merleau-Ponty**

What is interesting about Merleau-Ponty is that he, too, rejects Jamesian-type scientific explanations but nevertheless takes bodily experience to be central to an account of experience. In the context of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the body we may wonder whether Solomon and Nussbaum have in some serious way understated the significance of bodily experience.

A key aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is his characterisation of the body as key to our relationship with the world. As he puts it, 'the body is our anchorage in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.146). He adds that the 'body is our general means of having a world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.147). According to Merleau-Ponty it is an abstraction to conceive of the self as consisting in a Cartesian like way of a mind which is separate from the world. Rather, we are intrinsically engaged and embedded in the world, and it is through our bodies that we are positioned in the world and through which we perceive it.

Yet this is not the body as conceived by James, an object best understood through neurophysical investigation. Rather, people are subjects who have a subjective experience of the world through their bodily engagement with it. Relating to the world is to have goals and projects, and to be practically engaged with it. Those goals and projects and the modes of practical engagement are suffused with meaning; moreover meaning that cannot be captured through the methods of scientific investigation. As Taylor Carman has put Merleau-Ponty's position in the Foreword to Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, our perspective on the world is ubiquitous 'not just in sense experience, but in our intellectual, social, personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world' (Merleau-

Ponty 2014, xi). Or as Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, the body 'is my point of view upon the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.73).

Merleau-Ponty is critical of two main strands of philosophical thought, one Cartesian and the other scientific. This means that 'according to Merleau-Ponty the body is neither a collection of passive reactions to external stimuli nor the projection of actions prompted by the cognitive or conceptual act of a disembodied mind' (Roald, Levin, and K ppe 2018, p.208).

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'I am my body' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.205). From that point of view the work of Nussbaum and Solomon seems to verge on Cartesianism.

What, then, are the implications of the above for an account of the emotions? For both Heidegger and Sartre, emotions are core to our experience. They are one of the constitutive features of our being in the world. (See Krueger 2020). Merleau-Ponty writes with the same basic assumption but he does so only obliquely never systematically setting out a position on the nature and role of emotions. Nevertheless, recent scholars (see Krueger 2020 and Roald et al 2018) have reconstructed his philosophy of emotions and it is possible to see how Merleau-Ponty's account of the body is taken further in his view of the emotions and their role in human experience.

For Merleau-Ponty, as embodied beings we are open to the external environment of things and other people. Our relationship with them is constitutive of what we are as conscious agents acting in the world. That relationship is in part constituted through our emotions and the ways in which they are involved in our relationship with things and other people. Merleau-Ponty, for example, says that 'grief and anger are variations of being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.372). He also speaks of 'joy as a particular mode of being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p.192).

## Conclusion

The conclusion to the above discussion can usefully be set out by drawing on Robert Solomon's shift in his view about the role of the body. Solomon recognised that in his earlier work he had understated the importance of the body and of bodily feelings as an aspect of emotion. 'What has led me to this increasing concern about both the role of the body and the nature and role of feelings in emotion is in fact just the suspicion that my own cognitive theory had been cut too 'thin', and that in the pursuit of an alternative to the feeling theory I had veered too far in the other direction' (Solomon 2003, p.12). He also says: 'What Merleau-Ponty brings to the centre of our attention is a new appreciation of the ancient and Jamesian sense that the emotions are essentially bodily, but without the neglect of phenomenology that this realisation usually encourages. The phenomenology of emotion is, in part, a phenomenology of the body and bodily movement, and any analysis that neglects this cannot possibly provide an adequate analysis of emotion' (Solomon 2006, p.419).

Given the above discussion, we can see that a satisfactory account of emotions needs to capture both the bodily and cognitive features which, together, constitute emotional experience. As Michelle Maiese has put it: 'Thus... both the cognitive and bodily aspects of emotion are at play. In moments of anger, fear, and pride, bodily feeling and appraisal of the world are inextricable, and are central to what it means to experience that emotion (Maiese 2014, p.525). Merleau-Ponty helps us to reach this

conclusion about the nature of emotion and how we can best apprehend it philosophically.

## References

- Brady, Michael S *Emotion*, Routledge 2019
- Deonna, J A and Teroni, F *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*, Routledge 2012
- Krueger, J 'Merleau-Ponty' in Szanto, T and Landweer, H (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotions*, Routledge 2020
- Dreyfus, H and Taylor, C *Retrieving Realism*, Harvard University Press 2015
- Maise, M *How can emotions be both cognitive and bodily?* *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, (2014, 13: 513-531)
- Merleau-Ponty, M, *The Philosophy of Perception*, Routledge 2012
- Mc Culloch, G *The Mind and Its World*, Routledge 1995
- Nussbaum, M, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge University Press 2003
- Price, C, *Emotion*, Polity 2015
- Roald, T, Levin, K, and K ppe, S, *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Vol.38, No.4, 205-218, 2018
- Sokolowski, R *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, 2000
- Solomon, Robert C *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, Hackett 1993
- Solomon, Robert C, 'On Emotions as Judgements', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 25, Number 2, April 1988)
- Solomon, Robert C *Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: What is a 'Cognitive Theory' of the Emotions and Does it Neglect Affectivity?*, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 2003, 52, 1-18
- Solomon, Robert C, *Emotions in Continental Philosophy*, *Philosophy Compass* 1/5 2006, 413-431