Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium

ANTONY MANSTEAD, NICO FRIJDA & AGNETA FISCHER (Eds) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004 498 pages, ISBN: 0521521017 (pbk), $39.00

As its title suggests, this anthology is a collection of papers presented at a conference on feelings and emotions held in Amsterdam in 2001. One of the symposium’s main goals was to draw together prominent emotions researchers and provide a multi- disciplinary ‘snap shot’ of the state of the art at the turn of the century. In that respect it is truly a cognitive science success story. There are articles from a wide range of fields, encompassing, e.g., philosophy, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Another goal was to emulate a series of conferences of the same name that had taken place in the early parts of the twentieth Century. Included in the book are the title pages of these other conferences, which put the symposium in a nice historical context. The conference seems to have met both goals. It does, for instance, offer a vital snap shot of the state of emotions research, though this does not mean that it is best suited for the annals of history. This volume will provide anyone interested in the cognitive science of the emotions a clear indication of where the field has come from, and insight into where it will be going.

The book itself appears as part of Cambridge’s Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction series and is divided into five sections. Each section has several chapters making for a total of 26 essays, including the introduction and epilog ‘‘Feelings and Emotions: Where do we Stand?’’ which makes for a nice overview. The editors did an excellent job at articulating connections between the various chapters while simultaneously pointing out where the disagreement lies and where future research will most likely be directed; hence, readers unfamiliar with the general positions in emotion research would do well not to miss this. Needless to say there is way too much interesting and important material in this volume for this review to do it justice. So in what follows, I focus on some of the chapters that caught my attention, even though doing so eclipses one of the volumes main assets, viz. the diversity of perspectives represented.

The first part of the book, ‘‘The Nature of Feelings and Emotions,’’ includes six chapters each of which addresses some fundamental dichotomy in emotion research. Two are particularly noteworthy. In ‘‘On the Passivity of Emotions’’ the late Robert Solomon examines the active/passive dichotomy. As he had done throughout his career, Solomon argues that emotions are akin to choices and that we are responsible for them. He continues to challenge the orthodox view that the emotions are passive and that we simply ‘under go’ them. But that does not mean that those actions are fully intentional either. As he says:

Insofar as the emotions can be defended in terms of a kind of activity or action, it is not the fully conscious intentional action that should be our paradigm. But the realm of semi-conscious, inattentive, quasi-intentional, habitual, spontaneous, and even ‘automatic’ activity and action has received little attention in philosophy, despite the efforts of such seminal figures as William James and Maurice Merleau- Ponty (p. 15).

Solomon intends to rectify this situation. He is one of only two participants in the Symposium that list ‘‘Philosophy Department’’ as their affiliation, and though I wish there had been more, I can see why they chose him. He argues that work done in phenomenology and by so-called ‘continental’ philosophers like Sartre have important insights for the more scientifically minded and he does so by actually making connections with current empirical work. I’m sure it would have been very interesting to be at the question period after this talk!

In ‘‘Emotions and Feelings: A Neurobiological Perspective’’ Antonio Damasio introduces and defends a distinction that unites almost all of the researchers in the volume. This is the distinction between an emotion, which is a ‘‘patterned collection of chemical and neural responses that the brain produces when it detects the presence of an emotionally competent stimulus’’ (p. 50), and a feeling, which are ‘‘mental representations of the physiological changes’’ that were induced by the chemical and neural responses produced by the emotionally competent. More precisely, he suggests that we need the perception of the changed bodily states ‘‘alongside the perception of a certain mode of thinking, and of thoughts with certain themes’’ (p. 52) to fully count as feeling the emotion. The general form of the distinction is that the emotion itself is some neural/bodily event and one feels that emotion when one perceives the bodily event. It appears that this is supposed to capture the conscious/unconscious distinction. A conscious emotion is one that is ‘felt’. Damasio then argues that this characterization is general enough to apply to three different kinds of emotions; ‘‘background emotions, primary emotions, and social emotions (so-called secondary emotions)’’ (p. 52). This suggests that Damasio, and so most of the authors, tacitly accept some kind of higher-order theory of consciousness and so it might have been nice to have some discussion of theories of consciousness and their relation to emotion research. At any rate, unless otherwise noted I will use ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ in this way. This is an important distinction because it means that ‘‘the notion that the neural basis of feelings [is] out of scientific reach in no longer tenable’’ (p. 56). In fact many of the chapters sound this theme.

In the second part of the book, ‘‘Basic Psychological Processes in Feelings and Emotions’’, we find attempts to elucidate the ways in which feelings and emotions are activated or triggered and the ways in which they connect to action. In ‘‘Basic Affect and the Instinctual Emotional Systems of the Brain: The Primordial Sources of Sadness, Joy, and Seeking’’, Jaak Panksepp explores the nature of affective experience as revealed by modern neuroscience. He argues that basic affect is something that is shared across creatures and makes intriguing comparisons to Freud and Darwin along the way. By way of explanation he says:

I frame my remarks pointedly in a psychoanalytic context that lost much of its lingering appeal following the onslaught of the neuroscience, cognitive/computa- tional, and biological psychiatry revolutions a generation ago. I do this because Freud, in the footsteps of Darwin, sought to bring emotions, in their full glory, to the forefront of the twentieth century intellectual agenda. Although his vision failed, at least in mainstream science, he pointed us in the right direction, as had Darwin. Modern neuroscience can now add the needed depth to our discussion of such issues. (p. 175)

He offers evidence against the claim that feelings require being aware or conscious of some bodily change in the way that Damasio and most of the other researchers think they do. On his view feelings ‘‘reflect the intrinsic neurodynamics of neuropeptidergically coded sub-cortical emotional-instinctual circuits’’ as they interact with ‘‘the intrinsic, primordial ‘self-representation’ structures of midline regions of the upper brainstem’’ (p. 178). He then goes on to identify likely sub- cortical areas that may be the source of basic affect (the periaqueductal gray area), and likely chemical candidates for sadness/panic (opiods, oxytocin). Panksepp also provides evidence that rats ‘‘exhibit a joy-laughter response’’ (p. 186).

In ‘‘Exposure Effects: An Unmediated Phenomenon’’ R. B. Zajonc reports his finding that mere exposure to something, whether consciously or not, creates a liking bias for it in subjects. Just having seen something before, even if we were not aware of seeing it, makes us like it more.

In ‘‘Feeling States in Emotion: Functional Imaging Evidence’’ Joel Winston and Raymond Dolan summarize current neuroimagining studies of both feelings and emotions. They explicitly endorse Damasio’s way of characterizing both (p. 205). They present evidence that the amygdala ‘‘links pre-conceptual or pre-attentive sensory processing with emotion’’ and that it also is responsible for ‘‘the heightening of perceptual processing in relation to emotionally salient stimuli’’ (p. 206), though they do admit that there are other regions that play important roles such as ‘‘hypothalamic autonomic centers, basal forebrain, and brainstem nuclei’’ (p. 208). They next identify the anterior cingulate as responsible for generating awareness of autonomic changes, and so for generating one aspect of feeling. Though, in the final analysis, they argue that much of the work currently done confuses emotions and feelings and they urge that more attention be paid to Damasio’s distinction as it offers a promising framework to get clear on traditionally vexing issues.

In the third part of the book ‘‘Feelings and Emotions: The Place of Pleasure’’, we find four chapters that look at the role that pleasure plays in decision making. Something like a consensus arises from these four chapters that there is an asymmetry in the way that pain and pleasure are processed. In ‘‘The Affect System: What Lurks below the Surface of Feelings?’’ John Cacioppo, Jeff Larsen, N. Kyle Smith, and Gary Bernston present evidence that positive affect and negative affect are processed in an asymmetrical fashion. Negative affect ‘‘serves as a call for mental or behavioral adjustment and problem solving,’’ while positive affect ‘‘serves as a cue to stay the course or explore the environment,’’ this allows creatures to ‘‘enjoy the benefits of exploratory behavior and the self-preservatory benefits of a predisposition to avoid, scrutinize, and withdraw from threatening events’’ (p. 237). This separation of the activation and function of these two states, they suggest, provides evidence for an ‘evaluative state space’ model of the emotions where particular attitudes result from the net of the output of the two systems. This model predicts that there will be emotional states that are a mix of both positive and negative affect and they provide some experimental evidence that such mixed feelings do exist. Besides such expressions as ‘bittersweet’ which suggest that we have mixed feelings, and which subjects use to describe how they feel after watching certain films (e.g. Life is Beautiful) or graduating from college, they report evidence from gambling studies that subjects experience feelings they call ‘disappointing wins’ and ‘relieving losses’ when, for instance, participants win a small amount when they could have won a large amount (p. 229).

In ‘‘Pleasure, Unfelt Affect, and Irrational desire’’ Kent Berridge discusses evidence for ‘unfelt affect’ and its effect on desires. For instance, he discusses a study where ‘unconscious liking’ for a beverage was induced. Subjects reported that they liked a beverage more when they had subliminally seen a neutral face than an aggressive angry face even though they reported no change in their conscious emotional experience before or after being exposed to the subliminal prime. Berridge then goes on to discuss the evidence for the nucleus accumbens being the responsible neural structure for generating unconscious liking. This is interesting in that it may suggest that Panksepp’s criticism of the Damasio distinction discussed above is too quick. If even basic affect like liking can occur unconsciously then we need an additional argument that the basic affect that Panksepp thinks the periaqueductal gray is responsible for is in fact conscious affect rather than this unconscious kind. There is much more in this chapter that is interesting but that I cannot comment on, like work in his laboratory on inducing irrational desires and choice in rats as a way to shed light on human addition behavior and irrationality in everyday life.

In the fourth part of the book ‘‘Feelings and Emotions in their Sociocultural Context’’, we find four chapters that address the role of emotions in our social/ cultural interactions. Unfortunately, space and expertise (or lack of both) dictates that I skip this section.

Finally, in the fifth part of the book ‘‘Feelings, Emotions, and Morality’’ we find four chapters that explore the connections between emotions and morality. All the chapters in this section are very interesting but I am low on space so I will just briefly mention what is perhaps the most well known. In ‘‘On the Possibility of Animal Empathy’’ Frans de Waal continues to make his case for empathy in animals. He begins by canvassing the early experimental results of the 1960’s because, though neglected, they are still relevant and there is the added benefit that ‘‘they involve some experimental protocols that are unlikely to be permitted today’’ (p. 384). These studies, done in rats, pigeons, monkeys, and great apes, strongly suggest that there is animal empathy and sympathy. He then reports on his well-known research into the consolation behavior of chimpanzees. He concludes by arguing that a full model of empathy will have to account for empathetic affective responses in animals that lack a theory of mind and proposes a hierarchical, leveled view he calls ‘‘the Russian Doll model.’’ On this model empathy has an automatic ‘affective resonance’ that a lot of animals share and on top of which is built a ‘cognitive empathy’ which requires understanding reasons for the others’ emotion an at the top the full-blown notion of empathy that requires that we ‘‘fully adopt the other’s perspective’’ (p. 396).

As one can see, the range of issues addressed and perspectives taken are impressive and this is merely eight of the 26 chapters! This must truly have been a wonderfully stimulating conference to attend. I can only hope that the enthusiasm captured in this volume continues in the new century and that this tradition of conferences on feelings and emotions continues as well. My one small complaint about this wonderful book, if you can believe it, is that it did not have enough! Conspicuously absent, in my opinion, were representatives of expressivism/non-cognitivism in metaethics addressing (for instance) issues about the semantics of emotional expression or how affective neuroscience bears supports it or not and philosophers interested in addressing the issues of philosophical theories of consciousness that comport with the distinction between emotions and feelings as drawn by almost every researcher in this volume. However, perhaps this reflects on the field not on the editors. At any rate it is a relatively minor complaint given that it is impossible to include all of the stuff that ought to be included in a cognitive science event like this. More like wishful thinking for the next symposium.

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