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Emotion, Meaning, and Appraisal Theory

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ABSTRACT. According to psychological emotion theories referred to as *appraisal theory*, emotions are caused by appraisals (evaluative judgments). Borrowing a term from Jan Smedslund, it is the contention of this article that psychological appraisal theory is “pseudoempirical” (i.e., misleadingly or incorrectly empirical). In the article I outline what makes some scientific psychology “pseudoempirical,” distinguish my view on this from Jan Smedslund’s, and then go on to show why paying heed to the ordinary meanings of emotion terms is relevant to psychology, and how appraisal theory is methodologically off the mark by employing experiments, questionnaires, and the like, to investigate what follows from the ordinary meanings of words. The overarching argument of the article is that the scientific research program of appraisal theory is fundamentally misguided and that a more philosophical approach is needed to address the kinds of questions it seeks to answer.

KEY WORDS: appraisal theory, emotion, emotion theory, methodology, philosophy, philosophy of psychology, pseudoempirical, psychology of emotion

“How does it come about,” Magda B. Arnold (1960) asked,

... that some experiences have that particular quality we call “emotional”? Seeing a bear in the zoo arouses nothing but interest and curiosity—but seeing the same animal outside the zoo may arouse violent fear. What is the psychological process that turns a perception into an emotional experience? (p. 91)

Arnold was perhaps the first psychologist to emphasize that the kind of attention directed towards an object determines the emotional experience. It could not be, she argued, the mere perception or knowledge of something that arouses emotion. Merely seeing, say, an acquaintance of yours need not evoke any particular emotion. As Arnold saw it, for an emotion to be evoked the object “must be appraised as affecting me in some way, affecting me personally as an individual with my particular experience and my particular aims” (p. 171).

Arnold's understanding of emotions inspired a whole new generation of emotion theory generally referred to as *appraisal theory* (see Scherer, Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). Although her method was phenomenological (see Arnold, 1960, p. vi),¹ appraisal theory has since been based on empirical methods such as experiments and questionnaires. Parallel to the rise of empirical appraisal theory a similar view was developed in philosophy, but based on methods other than experiments and the like (e.g., Kenny, 1963; Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 1976).

Given this garden variety of methodological approaches, one may wonder how questions concerning if and how emotions involve appraisals or evaluative judgments *should* be addressed. In the following I will try to answer that question. In contrast to the empirical approach of contemporary appraisal theory my conclusion is that the questions that are central to it are about the meanings of words and are to be settled by reflecting on our use of words. Although I will not address the question whether or not such reflections in themselves are in need of empirical methods (see McEachrane, 2006), the conclusion is a radical break with current appraisal theory and a call for a more philosophical approach.

It is the contention of this article that psychological appraisal theory is misleadingly or incorrectly empirical. I first outline what makes some scientific psychology "pseudoempirical" and distinguish my view on this from Jan Smedslund's (e.g., 1991, 2002). Next, I will address the question why what we ordinarily mean by emotion terms is relevant to scientific psychology. I will then build on this by arguing that appraisal theory is methodologically off the mark since it seeks to empirically prove what is "conceptual"—i.e., what follows from the ordinary meanings of emotion terms. Following this, I argue against the view that the relation between emotion and appraisal may be conceptual *and* causal-explanatory/empirical. Then I argue, against Brian Parkinson (1995, 1997), that the conceptual rather than empirical relation between emotion and appraisal makes the empirical research of appraisal theory about the relation wholly irrelevant. Next, I apply what I have argued to a case study—an experiment by appraisal theorists Ira Roseman and Andreas Evdokas (2004). I then argue that every one of the questions that appraisal theories are meant to address is philosophical, rather than scientific. Finally, I wrap up the consequences of this for the future of appraisal theory.

What Makes Some Psychological Research *Pseudoempirical*?

Appraisal theory, I argue, is misleadingly or incorrectly empirical in that it seeks to empirically test what follows from the meanings of words. Appraisal theory, in other words, seeks to settle questions of whether and how emotions involve appraisals by, for instance, conducting experiments—whereas such questions are to be settled by reflecting on the meanings of emotion terms.²

Here I would like to distinguish my understanding of what makes some psychological research misleadingly empirical from Jan Smedslund's. In Smedslund's view, a proposition is *pseudoempirical*—i.e., misleadingly or incorrectly empirical—if and only if it is believed by the researcher to be empirical and contingent, but actually is a priori and noncontingent, given generally acceptable *axioms* (see Smedslund, 1991, 1997). An *axiom* is Smedslund's (1997, pp. x–xi) technical term for the necessary condition (the “core or essence”) of the meaning of a term.³ This emphasis on necessary conditions is bound up with a distinction between contingent and necessary truths, and Smedslund's (e.g., 1997, 2002) ambition to pinpoint the fundamental, necessary truths of psychology in a comprehensive system called *Elements of Psychologic* (EL). Although I agree that if a statement (e.g., “surprised people have experienced something unexpected”) follows from, or is expressed by, the meaning of a word (i.e., “surprised”), then it would be misleading to treat it as an empirical matter, I disagree, however, with Smedslund's emphasis on “axioms,” for at least two reasons.

First, it is not clear that axioms are needed in order to show why certain hypotheses are pseudoempirical (see, e.g., Smedslund, 1991, p. 328). Let us say that a psychologist proposes that “A person's fear is caused by the belief that he or she is threatened,” and treats this proposal as a hypothesis to be empirically tested. In response to this, Smedslund (1997) would refer to the following axiom (Axiom 4.6.11): “P is afraid, if, and only if, P believes that, regardless of what P does, there is a definite possibility that P will be harmed” (p. 54). This axiom, Smedslund would argue, expresses the necessary conditions for calling anything “fear.” Now if the psychologists' proposed empirical hypothesis, Smedslund would go on, follows from the axiom, then the hypothesis is clearly pseudoempirical—since it implies the necessary conditions for “fear” (and, therefore, what “fear,” at least in part, necessarily *means*). Contrary to Smedslund, however, I think that here it would be enough to refer to the meanings of words—without assuming that these meanings have necessary conditions. What is at stake here, namely, is whether or not, say, appraisals follow from the meanings of emotion terms, *not* whether or not these meanings have necessary conditions.

Secondly, not only does the notion of axioms seem unnecessary for calling out pseudoempirical research, but it is also doubtful that the variegated use of psychological terms in fact can be boiled down to a set of necessary conditions (see Hertzberg, 2001; Parrott & Harré, 1991; Shotter, 1991; Wittgenstein, 1953/2001). Smedslund claims (1997, p. 45), for instance, (in Axiom 4.1.1) that wants and beliefs taken together are the necessary and sufficient criteria of emotions, and that to any given combination of wants and beliefs there corresponds an emotion. But how about, say, the joy of a warm summer's day—need it be constituted by belief? Well, it would seem, one may derive joy not from the belief that one's want to experience a warm summer's day has been fulfilled, but, rather, from the warmth, the light, the greenery, and the leisurely atmosphere

(see Smedslund, 1997, p. 51). Other examples of emotions that, arguably, need not be constituted by beliefs are phobic fears of spiders that one knows can do one no harm, disgust for slimy substances, surprise at meeting a friend in a foreign country, anger at having stepped on a sharp stone, a love of science, inexplicable sadness about everything and nothing in particular (say, because one is depressed). Furthermore, there is the problem of pinpointing the necessary conditions that, supposedly, differentiate one emotion from another. About anger, for example, Smedslund (1997) writes in Axiom 4.6.4 that, “*P is angry at O, if and only if, P believes that at least one person whom P cares for has, intentionally or through neglect, been treated without respect by O, and P has not forgiven O*” (p. 53). But, surely, one can be angry at a person for other reasons, such as being irresponsible, cold, a nuisance, dumb, a poor student, or for belonging to the wrong ethnic group, worshipping the wrong god, having poor taste, not trying hard enough, and much more. Of course, one can also be angry with oneself for, say, allowing oneself to be deceived or for not completing what one set out to do. One need not even be angry with people, but can also be angry at, say, the weather. About depression, to take another example, Smedslund (1997) writes, in Axiom 4.6.11, that, “*P is depressed, if and only if, P believes that P’s lot can never be improved in the way P wants it to be, and/or P can never become the sort of person P wants to be*” (p. 57). But, surely, one can be depressed because, say, one presently thinks that one is a lousy individual—even if one also thinks that one need not remain so forever (e.g., granted that one works a lot on self-improvement).

In contrast to Smedslund, I will not take for granted the significance or existence of necessary conditions (i.e., “axioms”)—or necessary (conceptual) truths, for that matter. Instead I attempt to show that current appraisal theory is misleadingly empirical by simply calling attention to ordinary meanings and uses of emotion terms; irrespective of whether or not these meanings and uses have necessary conditions.

Ordinary Meanings of Emotion Terms: Why Care?

As I will be calling out appraisal theory on the ordinary meanings of emotion terms, it might be important to clear up some potential misunderstandings about the (epistemic) significance of these meanings. Why on earth—a science-minded person might wonder—should we so much as care about the *ordinary* meanings of emotion terms? For instance, how can we know that ordinary meanings of emotion terms reflect reality? And should not science, in its quest of truth, be more interested in emotional phenomena themselves, in *the reality of emotions*, so to speak, rather than in words and ordinary meanings? (see, e.g., Stanovich, 1998, pp. 38–39).

A straightforward answer to such questions is that scientific psychology should be concerned with the ordinary meanings of emotion terms because

any reference to emotional phenomena presupposes an understanding of what phenomena are to count as “joy,” “fear,” “anger,” and so on—which, in turn, means paying heed to “joy,” “fear,” “anger,” “sadness,” and so on, as we ordinarily understand them (see McEachrane, 2006; Melden, 1969; Rorty, 1980, pp. 3–4). For example, if we, when doing science, by “fear” do not mean “fear” in an ordinary sense of the word, then the question of what we are talking about arises (and how it bears on the questions we may ask about fear, etc.). If we point to a *reality of fear* that we claim is different than what we *ordinarily mean by “fear,”* then this separate reality must first be defined.

Psychologists of emotion often overlook this last point. For example, according to Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988), the ultimate goal of theoreticians of emotion is not to “*define* emotion words such as ‘fear’ but to specify, in as language-neutral a manner as possible, the characteristics of distinct emotions” (p. 8). Emotion words in our common language, they go on to say, reflect a number of important distinctions, a number of not so important distinctions, and sometimes no important distinctions at all (Ortony et al., 1988, pp. 8–9). Similarly, George Mandler (1975) thinks that our ordinary emotion concepts are based on unscientific, folk psychological notions of cause and effect, and that the philosophical enterprise of trying to attain a proper understanding of the ordinary language of emotion is a *subjective* theory of human action. It is, in other words, contrary to psychology’s *scientific* evaluation of emotions (Mandler, 1975, p. 6). Rather than concentrating on trying to define emotion terms and buying into questions such as “What is an emotion?,” the scientific psychologist should think nothing else relevant than knowing the psychological causes that produce the sort of events that we call emotions (Mandler, 1984, p. 12).

An underlying assumption in claims like these is that emotions have an independent existence similar to physical objects, and that they therefore can be studied directly, irrespective of the way they are conceptualized. But just the fact that emotions belong to “psychology” should make us wary of such assumptions. On the whole, it is hard to see how one can deny the import of ordinary emotion concepts for any theorizing about emotions, and still claim to be studying emotions. This is not to say that science cannot be conceptually innovative, that concepts cannot change, or that to go against ordinary meanings is a “sin.” It is merely to say that any diversion of meaning (scientific, technical, or otherwise) from what we ordinarily mean by our emotion terms will be at the risk of changing the subject matter (i.e., being not about “emotion” but about something partly or entirely different).

Psychologists of emotion may be particularly reluctant to accept this, as psychological phenomena are notoriously difficult to formulate in terms of testable data (see, e.g., Cornelius, 1955, pp. 15–16; Valentine, 1982). Psychologists may therefore feel that not confining themselves to how words are ordinarily used is pivotal for any science of emotion to proceed. However, one well-practiced way of overcoming this scientific diffuseness of emotions is simply to *give* them

empirical definitions. But, even so, such definitions will only make sense (as being about emotions) against a background understanding of what counts as emotions. An example is the (relatively) operational definitions of emotional disorders given in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). In *DSM-IV* the psychological definition given of “Generalized Anxiety Disorder” is in terms of observable symptoms such as: restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge; being easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating or mind going blank; irritability; muscle tension; and sleep disturbance (APA, 1994). Now note that the definition of “Generalized Anxiety Disorder” in *DSM-IV*, although it is a highly specialized construction, does not contradict our ordinary concept of “anxiety.” We may very well say, in our mundane lingo, that someone *restless, easily fatigued, with concentration problems, muscle tension and sleep disturbance* suffers from anxiety. On the other hand, if the definition *did* go against our everyday concept, then it might be hard to understand how we are still speaking of “anxiety” (i.e., why it would make sense to say that we have not changed the subject matter). If, for example, someone had all these symptoms but did not worry (which actually is a part of the *DSM-IV* definition; see APA, 1994) or in any way feel disconcerted, then it is hard to see how a combination of these symptoms could be labeled “anxiety.” They may very well be due to other reasons, or be expressive of other causes (e.g., some physiological disorder such as, say, an allergic reaction).

The Appraisals of Emotions: Conceptual Investigations⁴ or Empirical Discovery?

In outline, my overarching argument about appraisal theory is that having appraisals stand in a causal-explanatory relation to emotions presupposes that “appraisals” are logically independent of “emotions”—which they are not since “appraisals” logically follow from the ordinary meanings of emotion terms. By this I do not mean, as appraisal theorists generally do, that appraisals are *necessary* for emotions, but that when emotions are about something, they will often involve appraisals as part of them. In other words, describing someone as, say, “angry,” “sad,” or “afraid” often, but arguably not always, implies that the person is making certain appraisals of, say, blame, loss, or danger—and that these appraisals, then, are part and parcel of what it *means* to be “angry,” “sad,” or “afraid” in that context. By treating the relation between emotion and appraisal as *causal-explanatory* and *empirical*, appraisal theory is, thereby, confusing *cause* with *meaning*. Hence, appraisal theory is, one could say, “pseudoempirical” in that it seeks to empirically prove what is implied by the meanings of words.

With this argument in mind, it should come as no surprise that most of the support for appraisal theories comes from finding that self-reports of the experiences of various emotions include various appraisals (see Frijda & Zeelenberg, 2001,

p. 141). An example of this approach is the popular Subjective Measurement Method, where participants are asked to recall emotional experiences and report how appraisals had a bearing on them (see Schorr, 2001; and, e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Other related methods include considering judgments made by readers specifying appraisals in the emotional reactions of characters in short stories (e.g., Roseman, 1991), or seeking to relate individual differences in appraisal styles to individual differences in emotionality (e.g., Smith & Pope, 1992).

What all these studies have in common is that if appraisals are a part of the very meanings of emotion terms, then such studies at best give examples of how people conceptualize emotions in terms of appraisals. As Brian Parkinson (1997) has pointed out, in order for appraisal theory to defend a causal-explanatory interpretation, it must show that any emotion-appraisal connection is more than merely conceptual (p. 65). In Parkinson's words, emotions are no pre-labeled and free-floating feelings that we can observe independently and then link to cognitive causes. To empirically test whether emotions such as pride or happiness imply characteristic evaluations seems to miss the point: "... without some independent (e.g., non-linguistic) criterion of what counts as an example of the emotion in question it is impossible to make the empirical claim" (Parkinson, 1995, p. 48). Or as Nico Frijda and Marcel Zeelenberg (2001) put it, one "can only verify that appraisals are antecedents when the appraisal clearly occurred prior to their dependent variables, the emotions, and when the latter are logically independent of the former" (p. 142).

However, Frijda and Zeelenberg try to save appraisal theory from this verdict by claiming that there is plenty to choose from when looking for variables that are logically independent of appraisals. They take three major types of such variables to be: (1) feelings of pleasure and pain, or affect; (2) various physiological and expressive motor responses; and (3) motivational states or states of action readiness (Frijda & Zeelenberg, 2001, p. 142).

The problem with these suggestions, though, is that the proposed variables may very well be non-emotional. One may, for example, have a chronic backache without any particular emotion, jerk at the pain of a needle without any particular emotion, and be prepared to get up for dinner when called without any particular emotion. So the problem arises as to how these suggested variables may be identified as emotional or as part of emotional states, without any reference to appraisals. Of course, this is in itself a conceptual task, and, granted that emotions seem intimately bound up with intentionality or "aboutness" (which is an observation that appraisal theory after Arnold relies on), it is hard to see how anyone could possibly succeed with such a task.

Could the Relation Be Conceptual *and* Causal-Explanatory?

One might think that although appraisals may be a part of the meanings of emotion terms, it is still an empirical matter whether or not, to what extent,

and how appraisals trigger emotions. Appraisals, it may be thought, partly constitute emotion, but to what extent they precede emotion is an open question. This seems to be along the lines of Richard Lazarus's theory that appraisals are *sufficient* and *necessary* conditions for emotions in that they are capable of producing emotions and that emotions cannot occur without them (Lazarus, 1991; see Parkinson, 1997, p. 65). On this view, appraisal both precedes and (at least partly) constitutes emotion.

However, as Parkinson has pointed out, if appraisals are indeed a sufficient cause of emotions and a necessary part of emotions, then it would seem impossible to distinguish between the preceding appraisal and the resulting emotion. Furthermore, it is hard to see how such a theory is a substantial causal-explanatory theory, rather than a conceptual assumption that appraisals are a necessary and sufficient condition for the application of emotion terms (see Parkinson, 1997, pp. 65–66). And, accordingly, it would seem that Lazarus's empirical approach to understanding the cognitive nature of emotions might be replaced by reflections on our use of words. For example, how might it make sense to say that appraisals are necessary and sufficient conditions for taking joy in a hot bath or beautiful scenery?

Lazarus has responded to this kind of criticism by making a distinction between *synthetic* and *logical causality*, and claiming that in his theory the causal connections between appraisals and emotions are both causal-explanatory and logical.

In *synthetic causality*, which is deterministic, appraisal patterns bring about particular emotions; in *logical causality*, appraisal implies particular emotions without any necessary causal ascription.

I had intended that the connections apply in both causal senses, not just logical but also synthetic. Thus, the proposed relation between the appraisal pattern and the particular emotion—as well as any exceptions, such as when coping alters the appraisal—should be capable of being observed and evaluated empirically. (Lazarus, 1993, p. 344)

Still, this distinction does nothing in way of clarification. It is not clear what Lazarus means by “logical causality” (which, needless to say, is a concept of his own making), but what he seems to be trying to say by the distinction is that appraisals both cause *and* are implied by emotions. Anyway, this distinction alone does not make it clear why “the proposed relation between the appraisal pattern and the particular emotion ... should be capable of being observed and evaluated empirically” (see above quote). Lazarus still has to do the job of showing *how* it makes sense to speak of a general connection between emotions in causal-explanatory terms, granted that appraisals belong to the meanings of emotion terms—a job that will require investigating the meanings and use of words.

To the remark that there is a conceptual relation between certain appraisals (e.g., a sense of irrevocable and great loss) and emotions (e.g., sadness), Lazarus (1993) replies⁵ that,

The relation depends on biology in the sense that, as a result of human nature, people will inevitably have certain social experiences that arouse certain emotions. For example, they will experience loss, find themselves being demeaned, or have their ego-identity enhanced—which, in turn, makes them feel sad, angry, or proud, respectively. (p. 344)

Lazarus may be right in saying that the relation between appraisal and emotion depends on human nature in that it belongs to human nature to grieve, get angry, or feel proud. One could also imagine human beings (highly exceptional ones, no doubt) who never grieve in the face of loss, get angry when demeaned, or are proud when their ego-identity is being enhanced. Yet, this does not make the relation between the terms “grief,” “anger,” “pride,” and “loss,” “demeaning behavior,” “ego-enhancement,” a matter of contingency, but a matter of what the terms “grief,” “anger, and “pride” *mean*. And this is precisely what seems to elude Lazarus when he, for example, writes that,

In any case, whatever the philosophical dogma, I would prefer that the proposed relations between core relational themes [i.e., specific appraisals] and the emotion aroused by a particular appraisal pattern be considered testable through observation. (p. 344)

Is the Empirical Approach of Appraisal Theory Still Relevant?

Does the conceptual, rather than empirical, relation between emotion and appraisal make the empirical research of appraisal theory about the relation irrelevant? I think so, but Parkinson (1997) does not:

... my argument is that if the true basis of the relation is conceptual rather than empirical, this conclusion leads to rather different consequences for the interpretation of research evidence and the development of future strategies for investigation. (p. 65).

In his criticism of appraisal theory, Parkinson (see 1997, pp. 65–66), paradoxically, seems to think that trying to empirically prove a connection between emotions and appraisals that is implied by the meanings of emotion terms is unnecessary *and* that empirical research about how appraisals are involved in emotions is relevant to help us understand the conceptual connections between emotion and appraisal. This, dare I say, methodological uncertainty is arguably the reflection of at least two misconceptions.

First, Parkinson does not seem to fully understand that reflecting on our use of words is integral to investigating their meanings, and that, with this in mind, it is not clear that empirical research is relevant (see McEachrane, 2006). What we need to do when investigating the meaning of a word is remind ourselves of how a word may be *used* in such and such context (e.g., a person telling a friend about his childhood that, “My summer times were joyous”) and how such and such use may be *understood* in terms of its meaning (e.g., he could have been referring to the free time, the sunshine, the warm

weather, the outdoor life, the adventures) and implication (e.g., finding joy in warm weather need not be constituted by belief). It is hard to see how experiments, questionnaires, self-reports, and so on, would be relevant to this, other than as a way of giving *examples* of how a term may be used and understood, but examples, then, that we might as well have given ourselves (perhaps with a little imagination). The point, that is, is not to try to *prove* or *disprove*, say, a relation between emotions and appraisals, but to try to understand what, if anything, it might *mean* to, say, speak of emotions (e.g., fear) as caused by appraisals (e.g., a sense of threat).⁶

Secondly, Parkinson misses the crucial point that appraisal theory conflates *object* with *cause*, and that the objects of emotions are not a matter of empirical discovery, but a matter of meaning. That emotions generally have objects is an insight that is central to much philosophy of emotion (e.g., Bennett & Hacker, 2003; Deigh, 2004; Kenny, 1963; Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 1976). Sadness, for instance, is typically *about* something—i.e., it has so-called *intentionality*—be it the loss of a loved one, public humiliation, regret at not having been there for someone, or feeling like a failure. The object of an emotion—what the emotion is about—is, one could say, constitutive of the emotion itself, and need not be what caused it (and vice versa, of course, what caused an emotion need not be what it is about). I might, for instance, be anxious because I drank too much coffee (which has given me the jitters), but my anxiety might not be about the coffee at all; in fact, I might not even be aware of what caused my anxiety, but may instead feel anxious about, say, not feeling in control of my work. Appraisals—as in blaming oneself for some wrongdoing in feeling remorse or thinking that one has irrevocably lost a loved one in feeling sad—are expressive of the objects of emotions and, thereby, part of what it *means* to be, for example, “remorseful” or “sad.” Appraisal theory, one could say, is confused since it fails to distinguish object from cause, fails to see that how an object is appraised defines the emotional state, and fails to see that the connection between such defining appraisals and emotions is not a matter of empirical discovery but a prerequisite for emotion talk.

The Conceptual Confusion of Appraisal Theory: A Case Study

As certain appraisals, according to appraisal theory, cause people to feel certain emotions, we should be able to predict that having or making certain appraisals will result in having certain emotions. Most studies that have attempted to prove such a causal connection, though, have given evidence either that certain emotions tend to correlate with certain appraisals (so-called “correlation studies”), or that people who imagine other people as having or making certain appraisals will assume that these people feel certain emotions (so-called “simulation studies”). In a relatively recent study, Ira Roseman and Andreas Evdokas (2004) attempt to give stronger evidence for a causal link

between appraisals and emotions than merely “correlational or simulational, leaving doubt about direction of causality and the generalizability of these findings to actual emotional experiences” (p. 1). What is needed, they claim, is experimental research “that manipulates participants’ appraisals and measures the emotions they actually experience” (p. 2).

In their experiment, Roseman and Evdokas (2004) focused on three positive emotions which they

... thought could be relatively easily and ethically induced (joy, relief, and hope) and the two appraisal determinants (motivational state and outcome probability) that are hypothesized to differentiate among them. ... The appraisal of *motivational state* is a perception of whether what’s at stake in a situation is getting less of something painful (“aversive” motivation), or getting more of something pleasurable (“appetitive” motivation). The *probability* appraisal is a perception of whether the occurrence of motive-relevant aspects of a situation is merely possible (“uncertain”) or is definite (“certain”). (pp. 3–4)

According to their predictions,

... appraising an event as consistent with an appetitive (pleasure-maximizing) motive and as certain to occur should result in joy; appraising an event as consistent with an aversive (pain-minimizing) motive and as certain to occur should produce relief; and appraising an event as consistent with either an appetitive motive *or* an aversive motive, but uncertain, should result in hope. ... To test these predictions, we manipulated appraisals of motivational state (whether subjects would see themselves as wanting to obtain a pleasant outcome vs. avoid an unpleasant outcome) and outcome probability (whether the outcome would be seen as certain vs. uncertain); and measured the extent to which subjects experienced joy, relief, and hope. (pp. 5–6)

In brief, the appraisal manipulations of the actual experiment were the following. In the experiment some participants found that they would either be in a group that would taste food that was extremely delicious to them in the pleasant atmosphere of a New York City restaurant of their choice, or be in a no-taste group (Roseman & Evdokas, 2004, pp. 7–8). Other participants were told that they would either be in a group where they would taste their “most disliked food or drink in the unpleasant environment of the Taste Laboratory of the Eating Disorders Research Center,” or be in a no-taste group (p. 8). From the pleasant-taste group some were told that they would *definitely be in the pleasant-taste group*, whereas others were told that they would *probably be in the pleasant-taste group*. From the unpleasant-taste group some were told that they would *definitely be in the no-taste group*, whereas some were told that they would *probably be in the no-taste group* (p. 6).

The results of this experiment showed that members of the group that would certainly or probably obtain a pleasant eating experience experienced more joy than the group that would certainly or probably obtain an unpleasant eating

experience. A sense of relief was significantly greater in the group that was certain to avoid an unpleasant eating experience than in any other group. And, as predicted, a feeling of hope was relatively high in the group that was uncertain to have the pleasurable eating experience, but, contrary to predictions, low in the group that was uncertain to avoid an unpleasant eating experience.⁷ Participants in this last group felt sadness, rather than high hope (Roseman & Evdokas, 2004, pp. 15–16).

According to Roseman and Evdokas (2004), the “results from the present study provide some evidence that appraisals cause experienced emotions, as appraisal theorists have contended” (p. 17). Moreover, their “findings argue against the possibility that appraisal–emotion relationships arise simply because emotions cause appraisals, or result from some third factor (e.g., physiological processes) producing both appraisals and emotions” (p. 17).

Along with other appraisal theorists, Roseman and Evdokas do not realize, though, that the kind of appraisals they have in mind do not stand in a causal (or other contingent) relation to emotions. Their study supposedly provides some evidence that judging that one will certainly or probably obtain a pleasant eating experience is more likely to lead to joy than judging the contrary. But this is not a matter of causal probability, but a matter of meaning. For although finding joy in the prospect of a pleasant eating experience is understandable as an instance of “joy,” finding joy in the prospect of something unpleasant is not; unless one finds some pleasure or satisfaction in the unpleasant experience by, for example, taking pleasure in the challenge. Similarly, it would not be an empirical hypothesis, but simply incomprehensible, to claim that any other of the experiment’s manipulated appraisals than being certain to avoid an unpleasant eating experience could lead to relief. Among the alternative appraisals, one can only feel “relief” about the absence of something that one does not want and that one thinks could have actualized. This is not a causal-explanatory statement, but a statement about the meaning of “relief.” And it is also a matter of meaning that one cannot be hopeful about anything whatsoever. Hope about something that one thinks cannot occur is not improbable, but incomprehensible.⁸ Here, again, Roseman and Evdokas’s essential mistake is that they do not realize that appraisals are not contingently related to emotion, but internal to—that is to say, a prerequisite of—speaking of “joy,” “hope,” “relief,” and so on.

Are All Issues of Appraisal Theory Issues of Meaning?

Ira Roseman and Craig Smith (2001) have pointed out that appraisal theories seek to address seven kinds of problems that seem to cause difficulties for alternative models.⁹

1. *“How can we account for the differentiated nature of emotional response?”* That is to say, how can we account for the fact that there

are several distinct emotional reactions such as joy, sadness, and fear (pp. 3–4)?

2. “*How can we explain individual and temporal differences in emotional response to the same event?*” How is it, for example, that in response to the end of a romantic relationship, some individuals may feel sadness, others anger, and still others guilt? Or that an individual’s emotional response to a given event may change over time (from guilt to anger, from relief to sadness etc.; p. 4).
3. “*How can we account for the range of situations that evoke the same emotion?*” How can we account for the fact that any emotion may be evoked by an infinite number of events, including events that have never been encountered previously? For example, sadness may be elicited by the death of a parent, the birth of a child, divorce, failing an exam, or the crash of one’s computer hard drive (p. 4).
4. “*What starts the process of emotional response?*” In most instances, emotions are reactions to events and the question then arises what the relation between event and emotional response is like (pp. 4–5).
5. “*How can we explain the appropriateness of emotional responses to the situations in which they occur?*” For example, how can we explain that the behavioral passivity of sadness often is an appropriate response to the death of a loved one, whereas angry protests would be a futile waste of energy (p. 5)?
6. “*What accounts for irrational aspects of emotions?*” For example non-adaptive emotional reactions as when fear disrupts a soldier’s ability to fight effectively in combat situations. Or situations where one may feel guilt (or anger) though one realizes that oneself (or the person one is angry at) is really not to blame (p. 5).
7. “*How can developmentally and clinically induced changes in emotions be explained?*” For example, why are some emotions (including fear, love, and shame) absent at birth and only develop when a child is older (pp. 5–6).

As I will argue, the majority of these questions are not causal-explanatory questions, but should, when correctly understood, be answered by examining the meanings of emotion terms.

Let us address the first question (1) first: “How can we account for the differentiated nature of emotional response?” The answer of appraisal theory is: “*Emotions are elicited by appraisals and each distinct emotion is elicited by a distinctive pattern of appraisal*” (Roseman & Smith, 2001, p. 6). Here both the question and the answer are considered empirical. But if we examine the question (together with the answer), it seems clear that the question actually is about how it is *possible* to account for the differentiated nature of emotional response. That is to say, how come “anger” is different from “fear,” which is different from “joy,” and so on? What does this difference depend on? Here appraisal theory

seems right in pointing to appraisals as a distinguishing factor, but for all the wrong reasons.

In ordinary speech we often ask why someone is angry, sad, and so on. A child who is angry with his sister may say, "She is not giving me back my sweets." In this case we are speaking of "cause" in some—albeit not causal-explanatory—sense. The child is characterizing his "anger" by describing what it is about. We may see the child hitting his sister and throwing a tantrum, which we immediately understand as "anger," and wonder what caused it, what it is about. The child tells us that his sister is not giving him back his sweets. This would make sense to us, not only as a reason for *his* anger, but also as possible reason for "anger" (as opposed to, say, "joy")—that is, for an instance and particular kind of "anger." If he told us that he is angry with his sister because she *did* give him his sweets back, we might be puzzled, as, on the face of it, that could not count as a reason for "anger." Some additional reason is needed. Perhaps they were playing a game that involved his sister withholding his sweets from him or perhaps she finally gave him his sweets back in the process of teasing him. Being angry with someone because they give us something will generally not qualify as "anger" as it—seemingly anyway—involves no "wrongdoing," "violation," "frustration," "offense," "blame," and so on. Thus appraisal (without going into the precise nature of emotion-eliciting "appraisal" itself) may be crucial to distinguishing one emotion from another or to understanding what causes someone to feel a particular way. This is not an empirical discovery about emotions, though, but a reminder of how emotions are made sense of, singled out, and identified. In terms of independent causes, the anger *might* (as a matter of logical possibility) have depended on a "hot-tempered" personality, tiredness (as so often is the case with children), an underlying sense of disappointment and frustration with the family situation (say, divorce), or supernatural demon-possession (although normally highly unlikely). These, therefore, are merely *possible* causes that are also reminders of how emotions may be made sense of, singled out, and identified.

Also the second question, "How can we explain individual and temporal differences in emotional response to the same event?," seems to be about meaning. The answer of appraisal theory:

... different individuals who appraise the same situation in significantly different ways will feel different emotions; and a given individual who appraises the same situation in significantly different ways at different times will feel different emotions. (Roseman & Smith, 2001, p. 6)

If the question were about particular individuals or groups of individuals, then it would have been empirical. It is clearly an empirical question to, for example, ask why one individual reacts in one way to an event and another individual reacts in a different way to the same event—say, the death of their mutual father. This may all depend on empirical facts such as their different

relationships to their father, biochemistry, type of personality, emotional condition at the time, and so on. Similarly, why an individual reacts differently to the same event (say, waking up in the morning) at different times may depend on empirical facts such as how well the person slept, how early in the morning it is, dream-contents, physiological status, expectations of the day, and so on. But this is not the sort of question that appraisal theory has in mind. The question appraisal theory seeks to answer is rather how individual and temporal differences in emotional reaction to the same event are possible—irrespective of who the individual is, what sort of an event it is, and so on. Again, such a question is about what it may mean to speak of individual and temporal differences of emotional reaction to the same event. And so the question belongs to the logic of our emotion terms, and is to be answered, if at all, by figuring out what renders different emotional terms applicable to the same events. For example, one sibling felt a sense of relief at the death of her father because the father had strongly wanted to pass on, while another sibling felt a mixture of sadness and anger because he had lost his chance of ever making up with his father.

“How can we account for the range of situations that evoke the same emotion?” Appraisal theory: “... *all situations to which the same appraisal pattern is assigned will evoke the same emotion*” (Roseman & Smith, 2001, pp. 6–7). Again, if we by “How can we account for ...” mean how is it possible that a range of situations can evoke the same emotion, then this will depend on what it may mean to speak of the same emotions about different events. For example, it is possible to understand the death of a parent, divorce, failing an exam, or the crash of one’s computer hard drive as being a matter of “loss” and thus a reason for “sadness.”

“What starts the process of emotional response?” Appraisal theory: “... *appraisals start the emotion process, initiating the physiological, expressive, behavioral, and other changes that comprise the resultant emotional state*” (Roseman & Smith, 2001, p. 7). Again, what actually starts a specific process of emotional response depends on the facts of the specific situation, but what (logically speaking) may cause an emotional response depends on what it may mean to speak of this or that as a cause. And whether or not it is always appraisals that elicit emotions depends on whether or not speaking of emotions always implies appraisals. For example, if a person perceives a street as gloomy and is thereby a little saddened by it, must his or her sadness involve an appraisal (e.g., “what a gloomy street”)?

Questions 5, 6, and 7 are also, correctly understood, about what we mean when speaking of emotions. “How can we explain the appropriateness of emotional responses to the situations in which they occur?” The ways in which an emotion may be appropriate or inappropriate depend on what may be meant by speaking of emotions in those terms. Whether or not emotions are appropriate or inappropriate because of appraisals depends on the extent to which our talk of emotional appropriateness depends on talk of appraisals.

“What accounts for irrational aspects of emotions?”¹⁰ What makes an emotion “irrational” depends on our understanding of “rationality” and on how an emotion may be understood as being “rational” or “irrational.” For example, in situations where one may feel guilt though one realizes that one-self is really not to blame (see question 6 above), one’s guilt may be described as “irrational” as one’s reaction is based on a false appraisal and/or goes against one’s better judgment.

“How can developmentally and clinically induced changes in emotions be explained?” depends on how certain changes in emotion *can* be explained.¹¹ For example, why shame is absent at birth and only develops when a child is older has to do with the fact that shame typically is constituted by an appraisal of oneself as being inappropriate, or being associated with or having done something inappropriate, in the eyes of others—and that an infant feels no shame in so far as he or she lacks the social understanding needed to make such appraisals.

In summary, the kind of questions that appraisal theory seeks to answer have nothing to do with experimental methods and everything to do with reflecting on our use of words.

In Conclusion: Is There a Future for Appraisal Theory?

The short answer to this question is *no!* Appraisal theory is *pseudoempirical*, to borrow Jan Smedslund’s term, and a prime example of much of psychology’s one-sided adherence to empirical methods. Not only do appraisal theorists fail to see that experiments and the like might arguably be irrelevant to the questions that concern them, on the flip side they consequently also fail to see how the kind of investigations into the meanings of words that have traditionally belonged to the domain of philosophy might be relevant to their explorations. At worst, it seems that appraisal theorists have fallen for a kind of *scientism* in that they cannot conceive of any knowledge of human psychology other than scientific knowledge. At best, appraisal theorists do not deny that doing philosophy might be relevant to empirical psychology, but have such a hazy understanding of philosophy (and the *philosophy of psychology* in particular, one might add) that they fail to see how. Although, for instance, Richard Lazarus (1991), one of the pioneers of appraisal theory, thought that it needed to appeal to empirical as well as purely “rationalist” means, he never gave any reasons as to exactly why he thought so or what he meant by “rationalist means” other than the obvious—that they are non-empirical and involve reasoning. Anyhow, if what I am arguing is correct, then the ignorance of the relevance of philosophy is to the detriment of appraisal theorists since the questions they grapple with are cut out for philosophy rather than empirical science.

On a less harsh note, though, some of appraisal theory might have a future—but not without the aid of philosophy. Klaus Scherer (2001), for

example, has suggested that perceptions of objects—or “stimulus,” as he prefers to say—go through an intricate information-processing system that determines the kind of emotional response. At the core of this emotion system there is a sequence of appraisals that check the relevance of an object, the implications of an object to the person, the ability to cope with the implications of the object, and the significance of the object to the person’s self-concept, values, and norms. This sequence of “stimulus evaluation checks” is interconnected to, among other things, attention, memory, motivation, reasoning, and self, and that, furthermore, can take place on either a “sensory-motor,” “schematic,” or “conceptual” level (Scherer, 2001). It is conceivable that the brain may indeed have emotion systems that process information, that give rise to emotional reactions, and that may be corroborated by an empirical study of the brain. *But* it will be the business of philosophy to, for instance, figure out whether or not, to what extent, and how emotions depend on appraising the relevance of an object, the ability to cope with the implications of that object, and the significance of that object to the person’s self-concept, values, and norms.

A reason why the questions that appraisal theorists grapple with are cut out for philosophy rather than empirical science seems to be the questions’ level of generality. Scientific methods are certainly in place if psychologists were to limit their inquiries about the relationship between emotion and appraisal to specific circumstances and, for example, ask which appraisals people who think they lead “very happy lives” tend to have. Or ask, say, how clinically depressed people tend to appraise various aspects of their lives. Answering such questions will clearly depend on empirical findings rather than logical or conceptual points about the possible connections between “appraisal” and “emotion.” However, this is the case only in so far as it is understood how emotions *may* involve appraisals.

Notes

1. See Arnold (1960): “The only approach that promises a solution of the problem of how perception arouses emotion is a careful phenomenological analysis of the whole sequence from perception to emotion and action” (p. 170). Here we only need to note that her method involved paying attention to her own emotional experiences.
2. This kind of philosophical research has become relatively common in some circles. According to Jan Smedslund (2002, pp. 53–54), for instance, the tendency—due, in his mind, to an absence of conceptual analysis—to treat any hypothesis as empirically testable is the Achilles’ heel of contemporary psychology. Another obvious reference point is Wittgenstein’s (1953/2001) famous words, “in psychology there are experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*,” and the “existence of the experimental method makes us think that we have means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by” (p. 197e). These words have become emblematic of a growing criticism—especially among

so-called *discursive psychologists*—that contemporary psychology is in dire need of paying heed to issues of linguistic meaning (e.g., Harré, 1999; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Potter, 2000; Sharrock & Coulter, 1999; Shotter, 1997, 2001). Similarly, although less informed by Wittgenstein, André Kukla (1989, 2001) has advocated for a *theoretical psychology*—analogous to *theoretical physics*—which acknowledges logical as well as empirical truths, and which addresses conceptual issues alongside issues of logical cohesion.

3. Smedslund (1997) contrasts an *axiom* to a *definition*, which, in his book, is to stipulate the entire meaning of a term. And contrary to axioms, Smedslund thinks, “definitions of ordinary language terms are relatively useless,” since the “contrast between an attempted strict definition of a term and the richness, vagueness, and variability of its meaning in ordinary language leads to un-repeated and unending debates” (pp. x–xi).
4. By “concepts” I do not mean, as, for example, Parkinson does (1995), “ideas,” but “meanings of words,” and, subsequently, by “conceptual investigations” I mean “investigations into the meanings of words (by reflecting on their use).”
5. This reply is a response to Richard Shweder’s critique that no conceivable observation, however exotic, could lead us “to conclude, for example, that for some peoples of the world the appraisal of irrevocable loss is causally connected to pride and happiness and the appraisal of enhanced ego-identity is causally connected to sadness and shame” (Lazarus, 1993, p. 343). The reason for this is that “loss” is not part of the meaning of “pride” or “happiness,” and “self-inflation” or “-admiration” is not part of the meaning of “sadness” or “shame.” Nevertheless, perhaps we could find, say, that in some imaginary culture a father may feel some *pride* in the *loss* of a stillborn daughter because this is believed to be an honorific sign of future blessings.
6. On the whole, it seems fair to say that Parkinson has not sufficiently examined his methodological suppositions for investigating the meanings of emotion terms. This does not least express itself in the fact that he, for no apparent reason, most often appeals to empirical experiments, but sometimes also to the use and understanding of words. For instance, in one place he claims that appraisals seem to be relatively central to ordinary emotion terms by arguing that

... there seems to be something infelicitous about statements that suggest that a person is undergoing emotion but has no evaluative relation to what is happening, has happened, or might happen. Sentences such as “I am angry with you but don’t blame you for anything” usually require special conditions and additional explanation to make ready sense. More generally, it is difficult to conceive of a full-blown emotion that is not directed at some intentional object and does not imply some characteristic evaluation and interpretation of that object. (Parkinson, 1997, p. 67)

This is clearly an appeal to our use and understanding of emotion terms. However, most often, Parkinson appeals to empirical studies—which, following my argument, can at best give us *examples* of how words may be used and understood. These are examples, though, that need not be given by experiments, but that we might as well conjure up ourselves as possible scenarios of word-use.

7. “A contrast test confirmed that hope was significantly higher in the Obtain Pleasant Uncertain condition than in the Obtain Pleasant Certain, Avoid Unpleasant Certain, and Control conditions” (Roseman & Evdokas, 2004, pp. 15–16).

8. Supposedly, the experiment also discovered that being *uncertain of having a pleasurable eating experience* gave rise to a higher hope than being *uncertain of avoiding an unpleasant eating experience*. But this should come as no surprise as being “hopeful” is something one is about the prospect of a positive outcome and that *having a pleasurable eating experience* is more of a positive outcome than *avoiding an unpleasant eating experience*. One’s hope is likely to be higher, in the sense that one is more positive about the outcome, in the prospect of possible pleasure (or victory, survival, etc.) than in the prospect of discomfort (or defeat, death, etc.). In the latter case, as the results of the experiment shows, one’s hope is more likely—by how the situation defines the possible emotion—to be tarnished, so to speak, by a sense of sadness or fear and the like.
9. The responses I later give to these problems or phenomena-to-be-explained are by no means meant to be exhaustive, or primarily to be solutions, but merely to be possible and alternative perspectives on the problems at hand.
10. To this question appraisal theory answers: “*Conflicting, involuntary, or inappropriate appraisal may account for irrational aspects of emotions*” (Roseman & Smith, 2001, pp. 8–9).
11. It would seem that why emotions develop over the course of growing out of infancy *may*, logically speaking, have many explanations, such as brain maturation, cognitive abilities, and social learning. Also emotional change induced by psychotherapeutic interventions *may* have many explanations, such as emphasis on proactively understanding and solving one’s problems, willingness to take responsibility and make an effort to change, and appraisal changes.

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