

A Dynamic Expedition through the Affective Landscape

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> **Upshot** • Colombetti's book is a contribution to the literature of at least three intellectual communities within philosophy and the cognitive sciences: affective science, embodiment, and enactivism. Despite the emphasis on embodiment over the past ten to fifteen years, and the resurgence of interest in emotion in the mid-to-late twentieth century, affect nevertheless remains underrepresented in the philosophy of mind and cognition, even in the embodiment and enactive communities. In her book, Colombetti helps to close this gap in the literature.

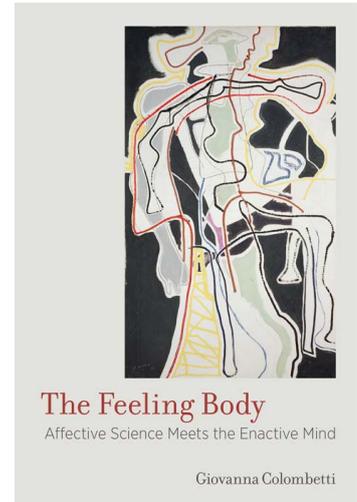
Giovanna Colombetti is perhaps best known for her work within the enactivist paradigm, both with Evan Thompson and independently, on highlighting the intrinsically affective nature of sense-making. According to the enactivist paradigm, a basic organizational feature of living systems (even very simple ones) enables them to relate to the world around them, and this activity between a system and the parts of the world that are relevant to the system is a minimal form of cognition. While it is part of the very notion of sense-making that living systems interact with those parts of the world that have value for them, Colombetti has been pivotal in emphasizing and developing the idea that sense-making is just as much an affective process as it is a cognitive one, and that therefore the enactivist paradigm implies that affect and cognition are two sides of the same coin; two ways of conceiving the same process.

While *The Feeling Body* continues this theme, taking an enactivist standpoint and arguing for the thoroughly affective nature of embodiment, here Colombetti goes beyond extrapolating affectivity from within the enactivist paradigm. Her thinking throughout is clearly guided by enactivist intuitions but the majority of the book can nevertheless be considered and digested by those who are not enactivist-inclined but rather are primarily interested in ways in which we might think about how affectivity and the body are related. The book distinguishes itself from others in philosophy and the affective sci-

ences due to the purposeful emphasis on affect rather than emotion. Affectivity is a broader notion than emotion, which also encompasses background feelings, moods, and other ways of experiencing the world, with (she argues) different degrees of bodily conspicuousness. While Colombetti does propose a way of understanding emotional episodes, she does not focus on emotions *per se* other than to show how her account is to be distinguished from the major current approaches to emotion.

The book is composed of seven chapters, with a short introduction and epilogue. Although the aim of the book is to build up a multidimensional picture of affective embodiment and so the chapters work together to contribute to this overarching aim, each chapter nevertheless stands supported by itself and is accessible independently. Indeed, despite the running theme of affective embodiment, it naturally splits into two: the first four chapters perhaps being more of interest to those inclined towards the affective and cognitive sciences and the final three to those interested in phenomenological approaches to embodiment.

At the start of the book Colombetti introduces the notion of affectivity, situating it in its historical perspective. She argues for a conception of affectivity that is not only broader than emotions and moods but also deeper, grounded in the very "lack of indifference" to the world that all living systems have. This ability to be affected by the world is what she calls *primordial affectivity*. Primordial af-



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fectivity, however, does not necessarily have a phenomenality of any kind and is present in the most primitive of living systems, to which most people would hesitate to ascribe any level of phenomenal consciousness. Colombetti moves from this discussion of the depth of primordial affectivity to arguing that the idea of depth in affectivity is present in phenomenology (e.g., Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as has been discussed at length, most notably by Matthew Ratcliffe 2008, 2010) but also in Spinoza's notion of the conatus, Maine de Biran's "active and effortful character of bodily subjectivity," Michel Henry's discussion of de Biran, and Jan Patocka, who links Heidegger's moods to de Biran's notion of the lived body. For philosophers and cognitive scientists more interested in bodily affect than emotion, the book is worth reading for this chapter alone. With the exception of Spinoza, these philosophers have until now not often

been drawn upon in the discussion of affective phenomena by philosophers of mind and cognitive science. Colombetti's outline of their contribution to the conception of a fundamental affectivity in the process of living is therefore very helpful and will inspire further research in this domain.

One of Colombetti's aims in this chapter is to show how primordial affectivity grounds (which she uses to mean "make possible") other forms of affectivity such that there is a continuum from a basic "lack of indifference" present in all life-forms to a system being able to discern what has value for it, still further to the basic and complex emotional episodes that adult humans experience. In other words, through her discussion of the notion of affective depth she seeks to get from what I suggest calling *structural depth* (the non-phenomenal depth of primordial affectivity) to *phenomenal depth*. I rather suspect however that, despite her discussion of Spinoza, de Biran, Henry, and Patocka, those not already inclined to accept the life-mind continuity thesis (see Thompson 2007) are not going to find the move from structural to phenomenal depth sufficiently motivated here. However, this is of course just another version of an explanatory gap between mind and body, or matter and consciousness. So accusing her of failing to close (or evade) this gap does not stand as a very deep criticism of the book, especially because little else of her discussion depends upon it.

In the second chapter, "The Emotions: Existing Accounts and Their Problems," Colombetti presents a comprehensive summary and criticism of current accounts in affective science in order to create space for her conceptualization of emotional episodes. She discusses in particular:

- *Basic Emotion Theory*, which was founded by Paul Ekman and the development of which continues to be the main paradigm for emotion research in mainstream psychology;
- *Psychological constructionism*, which refers to a stream of approaches to emotion recently unified by James Russell and Lisa Feldman Barrett according to which emotions are not the products of emotion modules/faculties but rather are constructed out of domain general mechanisms along with contextual information;

- Klaus Scherer's *Component Process Model*, an influential multi-dimensional successor to appraisal theories.

Basic Emotion Theory posits a set of discrete emotions that are biologically basic affect programs for physiological response and behavior that are common across cultures and some species, and that (in the received view, though she is careful to explain that this is not Ekman's own proposal) provide the building blocks for more complex emotions. Psychological constructionism¹ argues that our emotions are grounded in "core-affect," an affectively basic psychological experience made up of differing values along the dimensions of bodily arousal and valence. Emotions are then constructed on the back of core-affect through labeling and categorizing these and other stimuli based on past experience and thereby constructing a new type of experience that affects how further stimuli are processed. The Component Process Model, in contrast, proposes that emotions are synchronized patterns of the component subsystems including the autonomic, motor, and feelings but especially appraisal.

While Colombetti's analysis and critique of Basic Emotion Theory is fair and important given the theory's influence in mainstream psychology, I had the impression that she rejected psychological constructionism rather too hastily, partly because she was engaging with the early presentations of the view. Since *The Feeling Body* was published, Barrett and Russell have brought out an edited collection of a variety of approaches to the psychological construction of emotions (Barrett & Russell 2014) that may go some way to dissipating Colombetti's worries with regard to their overemphasis on language and underemphasis on the biological. And, indeed, Luc Faucher has argued that psychological constructionist approaches are compatible with what he calls weak biological constructionism (Faucher 2013).

Of the three theories discussed, Colombetti is most enthusiastic about (and her own view comes closest to) the Component Process Model. Nevertheless she rejects it for its emphasis on the driving role of appraisal in

1| Russell & Barrett's constructionism should not be confused with Seymour Papert's constructionism in educational research (cf. the upcoming special issue of *Constructivist Foundations* 10(3)).

organizing the interaction between components. Her model proposes rather that the components self-organise into sets of patterns that can be recognized as emotional episodes without requiring any single driving process.

Rather than just taxonomising bodily, affective phenomena, Colombetti gives us a way of conceptualizing these phenomena in terms of the topological presentation of dynamical systems. This model develops Walter Freeman's dynamical account of affectivity and conceives of the deep affective phenomena as the particular topology of the state space that enables individual dynamical patterns of emotion forms to emerge as attractors, entraining the neural, muscular, and autonomic components. To illuminate this for those not versed in the topological language of dynamical systems theory, she compares the background affect to a climate zone, and the emotional episodes to the weather patterns that this particular climate zone enables. She proposes understanding the interpersonal and environmental factors that shape both background affect and individual emotional episodes as control parameters, i.e., those factors that would change the climate zone from, say, a tropical to a Mediterranean or Arctic one, thus enabling a different set of weather patterns to emerge. As I understand it, the final picture is that of an attractor landscape – a topographical map of hills and valleys – that can be changed to a new landscape – of different hills and valleys – by twisting either the interpersonal or environmental knobs, i.e., changing the interpersonal or environmental situation in a qualitatively significant way. This picture manages to incorporate all three factors known to be of relevance to moods and emotion regulation: neural, bodily and expressive, and interpersonal.

The presentation of her conception of emotion episodes in dynamical terms is important for two reasons:

- She emphasizes understanding these episodes as diachronic processes (i.e., as taking place and developing over time), rather than synchronic episodes.
- Her conception provides a natural way of illustrating how emotional episodes can emerge through the self-organisation of the neural, bodily, and expressive components enabled by an affective

background of moods and other bodily feelings.

I also find the topological language of dynamical systems theory a useful tool for envisioning how emotions and moods are distinct yet fundamentally intertwined phenomena, and found Colombetti's consideration of interpersonal and environmental activity as control parameters of these processes a very helpful addition for picturing the causal complexity, and constitutive interdependence of, these processes.

The next part of the book focuses on providing an account of appraisal that is contrasted with the cognitive and embodied approaches dominant in psychology. These, even when they emphasize the role of the body, are nevertheless conceived of as distinct processes that influence or bring about emotions. Her proposal, in contrast, is that appraisal is best understood not as a separate step in the bringing about of emotion that is done by a part of the brain or cognitive system, but rather that bodily feelings are part of an appraising interaction between the whole system and its environment. She then turns to an exploration of the different types of bodily experience present in emotions putting her view into dialogue with proposals by, among others, Shaun Gallagher, Dorothee Legrand, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, and Dan Zahavi. She argues for conceiving of bodily feelings in emotion experience as either conspicuous or nonconspicuous and thereby being able to account for the bodily nature of all emotion experience (indeed all experience), even when those bodily feelings are not at the forefront of our consciousness.

The penultimate chapter, "Ideas for an Affective "Neuro-physio-phenomenology," describes the neuro-phenomenological approach to psychology and neuroscience. Colombetti proposes that investigations of first person experience should be integrated with our investigations of mental phenomena from the third person perspective. In the light of the dynamical presentation of affective phenomena, it is clear why this is necessary: levels of experience are not informationally encapsulated and independent. Rather, each level has the potential to shape phenomena on lower and higher levels. Colombetti pushes for an inclusion of the neurophenomenological method in mainstream affective science.

In the final chapter, "Feeling Others," Colombetti addresses the question of affect in interaction, i.e., why do we experience others as not merely moving bodies, but as living, minded beings. This is relevant to the discussion of bodily affect not only because interpersonal interaction is, on her proposal, one of the key control parameters of the affective landscape but also because it enables us to see interaction as another case of dynamical entrainment that realizes further patterns or "emotion forms."

This book stands as a key text for anyone entering the debate on affectivity, emotions, and the body. It goes beyond just collecting together the main themes of Colombetti's research so far by situating affectivity in its historical context in a way that has up until now been lacking in the literature. Furthermore, her engagement with the major theories in current affective science enables this enactively inspired, dynamic account to contribute to the orthodox scientifically informed debate about how to conceptualize emotions. This is important because without this, the inevitable result of conceiving of theories within a non-orthodox paradigm meant that those interested in emotion and enactivism ended up predominantly talking to others within the enactive paradigm and not being able to engage fully with (or get the engagement of) the rest of the intellectual community.

While *The Feeling Body* can most easily be categorized as an introduction to the philosophy of affect and embodiment, it also does double duty as an entry point into a newly emergent approach to philosophy of mind and cognition that brings phenomenology and the cognitive sciences together. Whether one wishes to conceive of this movement as enactivism broadly construed, or – avoiding the implication of working within a non-orthodox paradigm – the phenomenologically-friendly segment of the 4EA (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, and affective) community, it is nevertheless a movement with a growing momentum and expanding interests and is steadily defining itself in terms of its rigorous engagement with both phenomenology and science. *The Feeling Body* therefore not only presents a scientifically and phenomenologically informed account of affect and emotion that is consistent with – but builds

upon – the enactive approach to cognition; an account that provides an alternative to the mainstream theories of emotion and mood in affective science while accommodating the positive points of, and remaining in discourse with, each. It also, and just as usefully, provides a door to a particular, state-of-the-art, approach to embodiment research. Coming from an enactive and embodiment friendly perspective (to make my cards clear), my main criticism of the book is that I would have liked more of it: more detail on the history of affect, more detail on the dynamical model of emotion, and more detail on the bodily nature of interaction. However, this only goes to show how very new this paradigm is and how many opportunities there currently are for researchers to explore the various kinds of bodily affectivity described here.

The Feeling Body is the book that I wish had been available at the beginning of my graduate studies. It will provide an excellent stepping-stone for researchers in this area to develop the nascent area of affectivity and embodiment yet further.

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