

Perceptual Theories

1. Motivations

Perceptual theories of emotion try to find a middle ground between cognitive and non-cognitive theories. They aim to give an account of emotion as a unified mental state, with intentional content, and phenomenology. But they want to resist the idea that emotions are (or involve) full-fledged judgments. They point to two difficulties:

1. Recalcitrant Emotions: our emotions and judgments can conflict. When this happens, there's something irrational about it. But it's not the same kind of irrationality that arises when someone has contradictory judgments. (Cf. Brady)

2. Emotional Options: Roberts argues that we should not identify emotions with judgments because "a rational person has more options with respect to his emotions than he has with respect to his judgments" (p.198). What does this mean? Roberts argues that, for example, when I am feeling afraid, I can "refocus" the situation, so that I am no longer afraid. For example, when I have to save a child from a burning building, it's (to some extent) up to me whether I conceive of the situation as a threat to my wellbeing or as a rescue task. Roberts argues:

"It is within my psychological repertoire as a rational chooser to construe the situation in these two, and an indefinite number of other, ways; and it is in virtue of this optionality of construal that I have emotional options. It is far less often within my repertoire as a rational chooser to decide to modify my judgments or even just to abandon them; if I am a rational person, judgments are almost entirely forced upon me, in any given situation, being required by evidence and logic." (p. 199-200)

(Is this really right? Given that judgments are actions, don't we have some choice over whether we make them or not?)

2. What does a Perceptual Theory of Emotions look like?

The proponents of a perceptual theory of emotions point out that judgments/beliefs are not the only states that have intentional content. Perception involves intentional content, too!

"perception also possess both phenomenology and intentionality, and...its intentional content is also part of its conscious subjective character." (Doering, p. 376)

To be clear, perceptual theorists do not insist that emotions are literally sense perceptions. Rather, we should think of them as *analogous*.

Analogous in what way?

1. Feeling: Like sense perceptions, emotions are occurrent states, they capture and occupy our attention, phenomenology.

2. Representational Content: Just like perception, emotions have correctness conditions. But unlike in belief, an agent experiencing an emotion need not regard the content as true. She merely takes it to appear true. "I am afraid of the gorilla but I know it's not dangerous" is not Moore-paradoxical. The emotion of fear presents merely an appearance of truth. Emotions thus involve an attitude to a content that is different from belief.

3. The Nature of Content: Because there can be conflict without contradiction, Doering suggests that the content of both perception and emotion is not inferentially related to the contents of other states. Contents of emotions and perceptions are not subject to inferential constraints.

4. Evaluative Content: The content of emotions is evaluative. Emotions represent the world “in light” of our concerns:

“To represent something as fearsome, unjust, amusing, joyful, sad, or the like, is not just to distinguish it from other things in the world, but also to classify it with regard to the importance or worthiness it has for oneself.” (p. 385)

Emotions, according to Doering involve a representation of how the world “ought to be”, given our concerns.

Similarly, Roberts argues that emotions are “concern-based construals” of situations.

3. Some Questions

- Are these accounts better positioned to explained the phenomenal feel of emotions than cognitive ones?
- How seriously should we take the analogy of perception?
- There’s a general methodological concern here: perceptual theories do not classify certain “basic affective responses” as emotions (for example, reflexive disgust, recoil from snake, etc). But our commonsense understanding certainly does count them in. So what are the rules of the game here? What should a philosophical account of emotions deliver?