

William James on Emotion and Intentionality

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Abstract

William James's theory of emotion is often criticized for placing too much emphasis on bodily feelings and neglecting the cognitive aspects of emotion. This paper suggests that such criticisms are misplaced. Interpreting James's account of emotion in the light of his later philosophical writings, I argue that James does not emphasize bodily feelings at the expense of cognition. Rather, his view is that bodily feelings are part of the structure of intentionality. In reconceptualizing the relationship between cognition and affect, James rejects a number of commonplace assumptions concerning the nature of our cognitive relationship with the world, assumptions that many of his critics take for granted.

Keywords: affect; cognition; emotion; experience; feeling; intentionality

I Introduction

Recent criticisms of William James's theory of emotion tend to focus exclusively on his account of the physiology of emotion (1884, 1890) and neglect its broader philosophical context. A common complaint against James (1884, 1890) is that he fails to assign a cognitive role to the emotions, identifying them with feelings of bodily changes and trivializing them in the process. In this paper, I turn to some of James's other philosophical works (1897, 1902, 1909)¹ in order to piece together a theory of the *role* played by emotions that complements his account of what emotions *are*. Interpreting James (1884, 1890) in the light of these works suggests that many criticisms of his view are misguided in taking for granted conceptions of 'affect', 'cognition' and the distinction between them that James himself rejects.²

One might raise the concern that James's later works put forward distinct or even opposing views to those ventured by James (1884, 1890). However, it will become apparent in what follows that there is a great deal of continuity between these writings. Indeed, any tensions are largely due to the later James putting forward stronger or more explicit statements of views he was already leaning towards in his earlier writings on emotion. Some of these

views were ventured before his account of emotion in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and are retained as central themes in the later writings.³ Furthermore, the identification of emotions with feelings of bodily changes is explicitly retained as late as James, 1894. Hence the overall position that emerges is, I will suggest, fairly cohesive. It is also quite different from and far richer than the view that many recent critics of James take him to hold.

I will begin in Section II by outlining some common objections to James's views, emphasizing the manner in which these objections rest on the assumption of a clear distinction between cognition and affect. In Sections III and IV, I will suggest that James's various works incorporate a view of emotions and their role that rejects such a distinction. For James, affects are not 'mere' accompaniments to distinct cognitive states and processes, but inextricable from intentionality.⁴ Rather than taking a conception of intentionality for granted and identifying emotions with bodily feelings that are distinct from intentional states, James reconceptualizes intentionality so as to incorporate bodily feeling into its structure. I will conclude by suggesting that James's account has much in common with various theories that are explicitly opposed to it. However, it is perhaps preferable, given that it rejects problematic distinctions between cognition and affect that many of them take for granted. In so doing, it challenges a number of entrenched philosophical assumptions concerning the nature of our cognitive relationship with the world.

II Cognition and Affect

James (1884, 1890) famously challenges conventional wisdom concerning the emotions by claiming that they are not mental states that follow perception and *cause* bodily changes. Instead, the bodily changes follow immediately and automatically from perception in a reflex-like manner, and a feeling of these changes simply *is* the emotion:

Our natural way of thinking about these standard [strong, occurrent] emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My thesis on the contrary is that *the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.*

(1884: pp. 189–190)⁵

Recent criticisms of James's theory focus on his identification of emotion with affect⁶ and the apparent implication that emotions are wholly distinct from cognition. These criticisms can be divided into philosophical objections and objections based on physiological findings. The latter have, in the

guise of two central claims, been accepted by many as a conclusive refutation of James's position.⁷

First of all, James (1884: p. 192) assumes that the relevant bodily feelings are sufficiently complex and diverse to distinguish the plethora of different emotions we feel. However, a well-known experiment by Schachter and Singer (1962) is often taken to show that, under different conditions, experimental subjects undergoing the same physiological changes will interpret those changes in terms of very different emotions. This suggests that bodily feelings are not sufficiently differentiated to account for the full complexity of emotional experience and that an element of cognitive appraisal is also required.

Second, James's theory implies that a subject who is unable to feel the relevant bodily changes will have no emotions (1884: p. 203). Indeed, James recognizes this implication and proposes an experimental test of his theory:

A case of complete internal and external corporeal anaesthesia, without motor alteration or alteration of intelligence except emotional apathy, would afford, if not a crucial test, at least a strong presumption, in favour of the truth of the view we have set forth; whilst the persistence of strong emotional feeling in such a case would completely overthrow our case.

(1884: p. 203)

In the absence of such a case, it is often assumed that the retention of emotions in subjects with severe spinal cord lesions, which prevent all neural communication between brain and body, also amounts to decisive evidence against James's hypothesis. For example, Greenfield (2000: p. 98) claims that James's 'old, and now discarded' theory cannot accommodate such findings.

However, both of these purported refutations are contentious. For example, de Sousa notes that 'the range of physiological changes taken into account in Schachter and Singer's experiment is much too narrow to count seriously against James's view' (1990: p. 55) and suggests that physiological changes may after all be complex and differentiated enough to distinguish between various emotions.⁸ The claim that James's theory is falsified by the retention of emotions in subjects with spinal cord damage has been challenged by Damasio (1995, 2000) amongst others. Damasio (2000: p. 289) makes three central points against the evidence from spinal cord lesions. To summarize:

- 1 Information concerning many of the relevant physiological changes could be transmitted to the brain via nerves such as the vagus, which enter the brain stem at a level too high to be impaired by survivable spinal cord damage.

- 2 Hormonal changes will still be communicated to the brain via the bloodstream.
- 3 Some diminution of emotion is indeed found in many patients with spinal cord lesions.

Damasio's own physiological account of the emotions is essentially an updated, elaborated and revised Jamesian account, which maintains, with James, that 'the body is the main stage for the emotions' (2000: p. 287). Damasio remarks that James and also Freud were 'of necessity, somewhat vague about the brain aspect of their ideas' (2000: p. 38) and acknowledges that many of James's speculations concerning brain physiology need to be reconsidered.⁹ However, he agrees broadly with James (1884: p. 188) in rejecting the idea of a single brain centre dedicated to the emotions and in emphasizing the centrality of physiological changes.¹⁰

Given the considerable attention that Damasio's work has received,¹¹ it would seem that a Jamesian physiological account of emotion is still very much a live option. However, it is important to note that James's concern with the emotions is first and foremost philosophical. Hence, despite renewed interest in its physiological aspect, his account should not be overly 'scientized'.¹² James does indeed focus explicitly on the physiology of emotion. But he also stresses that his physiological account is influenced by an independently formulated philosophical theory. In other words, his philosophical conception of emotion serves as a background framework that structures his physiological theorizing:

although [a theory of brain physiology] seems to be the chief result of the arguments I am to urge, I should say that they were not originally framed for the sake of any such result. They grew out of fragmentary introspective observations, and it was only when these had already combined into a theory that the thought of the simplification the theory might bring to cerebral physiology occurred to me, and made it more important than before.

(1884: p. 189)

James's account has received a bad press from many philosophers working on the emotions. The resurgence of philosophical interest in emotion during the last thirty years is strongly associated with an increased appreciation of the cognitive dimensions of emotion. As Downing (2000: p. 247) puts it, 'almost everyone writing on these issues would assent to one point: it has been this focus on cognitive evaluation which has opened up the overall discussion in the first place'. This 'cognitive turn' does not bode well for James. In identifying emotions with feelings of bodily changes, he appears to ignore altogether the cognitive aspects of emotion. As Downing

goes on to remark, ‘James and Lange¹³ identified emotion simply and squarely with conscious body sensation, nothing more. A view which almost no one today, myself included, would not want to defend’ (2000: p. 248).¹⁴

Such criticisms presuppose a distinction between cognition and affect, where the latter is construed as ‘mere’ feeling. Any account identifying emotions exclusively with bodily feelings is regarded as ‘trivializing’ them. For instance, Solomon (1976/1993) suggests that ‘emotions are something far more sophisticated than mere feelings’ (p. 102); they ‘are not merely “affects” [...] but judgments that we ourselves *make*’ (p. 108). Solomon’s identification of emotion with cognitive judgement is premised on the assumption that bodily feelings are both distinct from cognitive processes and comparatively inconsequential to our relationship with the world. Nussbaum (2001) proposes a similar view, according to which bodily feelings accompany but do not constitute emotions (p. 60). Emotions, according to Nussbaum, are judgements concerning matters important to our well-being, which acknowledge our dependence on factors beyond our control (p. 19). They are complex, cognitive states, and to ‘feel’ an emotion is not to have a bodily twinge but to form a judgement (p. 60). Hence ‘cognitive’ theories of emotion tend to arise in explicit opposition to ‘affect’ theories, stressing that an emphasis on the cognitive aspect of emotion involves assigning emotions a more important role in our mental lives.¹⁵ Others have suggested that emotions incorporate both cognitive and affective constituents. For instance, Lyons (1980) advocates a hybrid theory along these lines, which acknowledges that feelings do contribute to the phenomenology of emotion (p. 13). He proposes that ‘the concept of emotion as occurrent state involves reference to an evaluation which causes abnormal physiological changes in the subject of the evaluation’ (p. 53). However, despite his acknowledgement that emotions do essentially incorporate bodily feelings, Lyons, like Solomon, takes it as given that cognition and affect are distinct. An emotion is construed as a state incorporating *both* bodily feelings *and* cognitive states, given that bodily feelings alone fail to capture the full complexity of emotional experience.

The charge that identification of emotion with affect trivializes the former stems from the concern that emotions clearly play a central role in our mental lives and behaviour, but can only do this if they incorporate intentional states. If emotions are simply feelings, they do not incorporate intentional objects. But it is clear that most emotions do have objects. As a tiger approaches at high speed, one is not simply ‘afraid’ in some objectless sense one is afraid *of the tiger*. Indeed, Solomon (1976/1993: p. 91) and Gordon (1987: p. 88) both go so far as to suggest that James’s view renders emotions epiphenomenal, i.e. cut off from the manner in which the triggering object is experientially presented and evaluated. A similar concern is expressed by Brewer:

[James's] identification of emotional experiences with feelings of bodily changes leaves their object entirely external to the nature of the experiences themselves, as if one first felt afraid all right, but then had to go on to look out for some likely candidate object of one's fear. [...] That one is afraid of *that particular object or event* is absolutely perspicuous, and intrinsic to the experience itself. So it looks as though we need to combine elements from both James' own theory and the idea of emotions as presenting specific worldly objects in some way with which he contrasts it.

(2002: p. 27)

Again, we see the assumption that cognition and affect are distinct phenomena. Bodily feelings, it is maintained, are not intentional states, and so an exclusive emphasis on feelings fails to connect the emotion with its object, even though it is phenomenologically apparent that emotions do *have* objects.

In what follows, I will argue that James himself rejects the distinction between intentionality and affect that his critics take for granted.¹⁶ For James, 'affect' is not inconsequential, trivial, epiphenomenal or divorced from intentionality. It is part of intentionality. Bodily feelings are indeed automatically triggered during perception. However, this does not entail that they are independent of intentional states. Although James does not explicitly employ the term 'intentionality', I will suggest that his view incorporates a phenomenological conception of it, according to which the *experiential presentation* of things is essentially bodily and affective. Thus James rethinks the categories that many theorists still assume as an interpretive backdrop.

III Bodily Feelings are Cognitive

The charge that James (1884, 1890) renders emotions epiphenomenal is understandable, given that he neglects to formulate an explicit account of the role that emotions play. However, he does at least indicate that emotions have some part to play in behaviour. Adopting a broadly Darwinian perspective on physiology, James claims that organisms' nervous systems are evolutionarily pre-tuned to ecological niches, responding perceptually only to those features of the environment that are salient in relation to potential behaviours. He remarks that 'peculiarly conformed pieces of the world's furniture will fatally call forth most particular mental and bodily reactions' (1884: p. 190) and 'each creature brings the signature of its special relations stamped on its nervous system with it upon the scene' (1884: p. 191). Bodily feelings are integral to an organism's physiological tuning to the environment (1884: p. 191). Certain features of the world

automatically summon 'good' or 'bad' feelings, independently of explicit reasoning processes, and these feelings play a role in structuring behaviour, in steering an organism away from those things that 'feel bad' and towards those things that 'feel good'. Because bodily feelings are pre-tuned to certain kinds of environmental cues, they are able to structure behaviour systematically in a manner that generally conforms to the organism's evolved needs and capabilities.

James also adds that the relevant physiological changes are not hard-wired to respond only to a rigid, inflexible set of perceptual cues but can be associated with novel stimuli through learning, constituting a dynamic field of sorts that renders only certain environmental factors behaviourally salient: 'A nervous tendency to discharge being once there, all sorts of unforeseen things may pull the trigger and let loose the effects' (1884: p. 195).¹⁷ Hence affects are automatically triggered during perception, as a result of innate or learned associations, and structure behaviour in rendering certain activities salient and deterring an organism from others. For example, the sight of a cliff edge, coupled with a bad feeling, serves to partially specify the behaviour 'back off'. The perceived environment is an indissociable amalgam of organism-independent features and organismic concerns. The set of things to which an organism is responsive does not comprise a disinterested representation of 'things outside' but a construct that reflects both the way the world is and what the organism brings to it.¹⁸

This emphasis on the role of affect in structuring one's bodily, practical orientation towards things will be crucial to my argument here. According to James's later philosophy (1897, 1902, 1907) cognition is invariably tied up with needs, capacities, concerns and practices. One's practical orientation, constituted in part by affect, is integral to the way in which aspects of the world are experientially presented. In other words, it is part of the structure of intentionality.

The claim that emotions structure our perceptual phenomenology might already suggest a substantial departure from the 1884, 1890 account, where James seems to say that emotions *follow* perceptions rather than *constitute* them. However, this apparent conflict is, I think, due to a terminological ambiguity rather than a genuine tension. James (1884, 1890) sometimes fails to distinguish clearly between 'perception' as a physiological process and 'a perception' as the phenomenological outcome of that process. Similarly, whether the 'object of perception' is the 'external cause of the perception' or the 'experienced outcome of perception' is not always clear. Taking such distinctions into account, the early James is, I think, saying that it is not an *object as perceived* but *sensory stimulation of our perceptual systems by an object* that automatically triggers bodily changes, just as one would expect from an automated, reflex-like process. Consider James's statement that 'the emotion is nothing but the reflex bodily effects of what we call its "object", effects due to the connate adaptation of the nervous system to that

object' (1884: p. 194). He is not talking about the *object as perceived* but about the *object that is perceived*, the cause of an experience rather than the object as it is experienced.

Adopting this interpretation, I will supplement the early James's account of what emotions *are* with the later James's account of their *role*, to arrive at the view that emotions are feelings of bodily changes, which are triggered during perception and contribute to the phenomenological structure of perception. Given such a view, it becomes apparent that affects are not distinct from cognition but constituents of cognition; they play a role in structuring the experiential world that forms the context for our various deliberations.

James alludes to this sort of reconceptualization in his earlier writings on emotion, when he remarks that 'if our hypothesis is true, it makes us realize more deeply than ever how much of our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame, in the strictest sense of the term' (1890/1907: p. 467).¹⁹ Though James does not explicitly challenge the philosophical distinction between cognition and affect (as is understandable given that his explicit concern is physiology), he certainly entertains the possibility:

Cognition and emotion are apt to be parted even in this last retreat [science], – who shall say that their antagonism may not just be one phase of the world-old struggle known as that between the spirit and the flesh? – a struggle in which it seems pretty certain that neither party will definitively drive the other off the field.

(1884: p. 203)

However, in other writings, there are more decisive statements of the view that affect and cognition are not distinct categories but indissociable aspects of world experience. In *The Will to Believe*, James explicitly assigns a cognitive role to emotions, in aiding decision-making and belief-formation when other deliberations fail to provide grounds for preferring one option to another:

Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open', is itself a passionate decision, – just like deciding yes or no, – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

(1897/1956: p. 11)

His point is not that we can or should simply 'go with' our emotions and choose what to believe or how to act *in spite of the evidence*. There are certain

scenarios where, having exhausted all the evidence and gone through all the reasons, we still have no grounds for favouring one option over another. In such cases, our feelings guide us because we have no other source of preference. Without the influence of our various passions, we would be deliberatively paralysed. Abstention from choice is often not an option in our practical affairs and, in any case, James claims that abstention is itself a choice that is emotionally motivated. Emotions thus provide a kind of pre-deliberative, evaluative backdrop. Some options simply 'feel' better than others, and when we have exhausted all deliberations but are still presented with more than one 'live' option, our only alternative is to fall back on these pleasant or unpleasant feelings of body states to guide our choices.²⁰

A similar role has been suggested by a number of subsequent writers, including de Sousa (1980, 1990), Johnson-Laird and Oakley (1992) and Damasio (1995, 2000). For example, Johnson-Laird and Oakley claim that 'emotions help to specify which goals will be actively pursued, and which abandoned, or assigned to a subsidiary or dormant status' (1992: p. 208) and de Sousa argues that 'when faced with two competing arguments, between which neither reason nor determinism can relevantly decide, emotion can endow one set of supporting considerations with more salience than the other. We need emotion [...] to break a tie when reason is stuck' (1990: p. 16). But that emotions function as arbiters in certain instances of choice is only the beginning of James's story. Emotions, according to James, do not just intervene in deliberative processes. They partially constitute the world of experience whose contents form the material for our deliberations. We do not merely have feelings about aspects of a pre-represented reality, which in turn influence our decision-making. Rather, bodily feelings shape the manner in which things appear to us and structure our reasoning as a consequence. So affect is incorporated into cognition, structuring both intentionality and decision-making.

It might at first seem that James (1884, 1890) explicitly retains the distinction between affect and cognition, referring to *both* cognition *and* affect as though they are separate phenomena: 'Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth' (1884: p. 190; 1890/1907: p. 450). He asks us to imagine abstracting all our various feelings of bodily changes from an emotional state and claims that 'a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains' (1884: p. 193), suggesting that cognition is distinct from bodily feelings. However, he also indicates, in commenting on 'the dryness of it, the paleness, the absence of all glow' (1884: p. 202), that any such state is somehow deficient, as opposed to cognitively complete but cleansed of affect.²¹ This sentiment is conveyed more decisively in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,²² where James echoes his earlier thought experiment and considers what experience would be like in the absence of emotions:

Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it *as it exists*, purely by itself, without your favourable or unfavourable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. Whatever of value, interest, or meaning our respective worlds may appear endowed with are thus pure gifts of the spectator's mind.

(1902: p. 150)

The absence of emotion comprises a state of cognitive and behavioural paralysis rather than fully functional cognition, stripped of 'mere' affect. A phenomenology without affect is a phenomenology that guts the world of all its significance. The experienced world is ordinarily enriched by the feelings that we sew into it, that imbue it with value and light it up as an arena of cognitive and behavioural possibilities. So cognition without affect is not, according to James, in any sense complete. It is an extreme phenomenological privation that strips the world of all meaning, a state of depression or 'melancholia'. In such a state, James describes how 'the world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it glares with' (1902: p. 151). He discusses Tolstoy's report of his own depression in *A Confession* and observes how 'in Tolstoy's case the sense that life had any meaning whatever was for a time wholly withdrawn. The result was a transformation in the whole expression of reality. [...] Things were meaningless whose meaning had always been self-evident' (pp. 151–3).²³

So an absence or diminution of affect is not a refinement of cognition, but a mark of the 'sick soul'. Indeed, James's discussion suggests that our most basic familiarity with the world, our sense of belonging, of theoretical and practical orientation, is structured by affect. Emotion is not peripheral or epiphenomenal, but gives the world a kind of meaning that we ordinarily take for granted.²⁴

If intentionality is construed in terms of detached, unconcerned representation of an external reality, then ascribing such a role to affect makes little sense. However, as noted, James (1884, 1890) emphasizes a practical orientation towards things. Perception of the environment is shaped by needs, capacities and possible behaviours, and affect plays a role in this shaping. The body, for James, is an invariably active 'sounding-board' that 'reverberates' with varying degrees and qualities to all sensations (1890/1907: pp. 470–1). '[E]ach creature brings the signature of its special relations stamped on its nervous system with it upon the scene' (1884: p. 191), and

when those relations that tune organisms to the world are distorted or diminished, cognition is incomplete. As a phenomenological analogue of this, affect binds us to things, making them relevant and ‘lighting up’ aspects of the world in such a way as to call forth actions and thoughts. Without the world-structuring orientation that they provide, we are disoriented, cut off from the world, which no longer solicits thoughts and actions and is consequently devoid of value. In effect, James is saying that our very sense of reality is constituted by world-orienting feelings that bind us to things.

One might object that James (1884, 1890) construes emotions as occasional events rather than an ever-present experience-structuring field. However, although he focuses on strong emotions that only occur occasionally, James explicitly intends his claim that emotions are feelings of bodily states to apply more generally, to all the subtle emotions that we experience as an ever-present background to our activities. The bodily ‘sounding-board’, he claims, is active to varying degrees all the time. It might seem that certain subtle, intellectual or aesthetic emotions are very different from feelings of body states. As James notes:

There are the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings. Concords of sounds, of colors, of lines, logical consistencies, teleological fitnesses, affect us with a pleasure that seems ingrained in the form of representation itself, and to borrow nothing from any reverberation surging up from the parts below the brain.

(1890/1907: p. 468)²⁵

However, despite the apparent absence of feelings of bodily changes during such experiences, he goes on to claim that:

In all cases of intellectual or moral rapture we find that, unless there be coupled a bodily reverberation of some kind with the mere thought of the object and cognition of its quality; unless we actually laugh at the neatness of the demonstration or witticism; unless we thrill at the case of justice, or tingle at the act of magnanimity; our state of mind can hardly be called emotional at all.

(1890/1907: pp. 470–1)

Hence James maintains that ‘the bodily sounding board is at work, as careful introspection will show, far more than we usually suppose’ (1890/1907: p. 471). Indeed, given his depiction of depression as a crippling absence of world-orienting affect, it seems that bodily feelings provide a near constant background field, whose absence or diminution constitutes a dramatic deficit in our world experience. Feelings are integral to the structure of all

experience, rather than an occasional accompaniment to the perception of certain objects or situations.

That emotions structure our world-orientation in a cognition-enabling manner has been suggested more recently by de Sousa (1990). Emotions, according to de Sousa, 'give us frameworks in terms of which we perceive, desire, act and explain' (p. 24) and circumvent cognitive paralysis by '*controlling the salience of features of perception and reasoning*' (p. 172). de Sousa suggests that these patterns of 'salience' that we impose on things are not 'viciously projective' in that they can be appropriate or inappropriate to a situation (p. 202). However, James (1897, 1902, 1909) goes further than de Sousa, in claiming that our emotions do not simply impose patterns, appropriately or inappropriately, upon a situation. Instead, they partially *constitute* the situation. A consequence of James's practical conception of intentionality is that (a) emotions are a constituent of intentionality and (b) experience does not merely 'present' but also partly constitutes or 'makes' its object.²⁶ Any experienced or experienceable situation is an amalgam of the way the world is and what we add to it through the emotions. James departs from a notion of correspondence between emotions and states of affairs, maintaining that our relationship with the world is one of practical 'commerce' rather than theoretical 'correspondence'. The experienced world is always a reflection of our capacities, needs and concerns. Emotions are indeed reports of bodily states, but, as the structure of experience is inextricably tied up with needs, concerns and bodily capabilities, such feelings are not wholly 'internal' to the subject but world-orienting and, indeed, 'world-making'. The experienced world that forms the context of our deliberations and practices is a union of the world and what we put into it:

[T]he practically real world for each one of us, the effective world of the individual, is the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination. Withdraw or pervert either factor of this complex resultant, and the kind of experience we call pathological ensues.

(1902: p. 151)

This conception of emotion as part of a world-constituting practical orientation comprises an important aspect of the later James's pragmatism. I will now draw on James's formulation of pragmatism to elaborate further his account of emotion and situate it in the context of his broader philosophy.

IV Rethinking Cognition

James the pragmatist regards all 'conceptualized worlds' or 'realities' as structures that enable various practices. Whether we are referring to

abstract scientific conceptualizations or to the conceptualizations that we take for granted in everyday life, ‘worlds’ are essentially implicit or explicit tools that enable practices by making certain patterns salient. They are conceptual maps via which we structure our activity. Hence differences between conceptualizations are ultimately accountable in terms of the differences they make to our deliberations and actions, or to other conceptualizations that make such a difference:

There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

(1907/1981: p. 27)

The connection that James proposes between ‘worlds’, construed as conceptual frameworks or patterns, and practices is not a contingent one. ‘Worlds’ are not unmotivated conceptualizations but constructs that are shaped by various presuppositional interests, concerns and feelings. A conceptualized world is not merely a detached representation of ‘how things are’, but is partially ‘made’ by what we put into it. It follows that worlds will inevitably be tied to practices, in so far as they are partially constituted by a background of values, concerns, interests and preferences that are themselves indissociable from our practical dispositions. James places the emphasis on ‘world-making’ rather than ‘world-finding’ because he acknowledges that a multitude of different, equally coherent conceptualizations could conceivably arise through the many different possible capacities, concerns and preferences that we might bring to bear in our practical activities. Many different ‘worlds’ can be made that hold together, providing guiding frameworks for a host of practices. This pluralism is especially apparent when we consider different species and the various ways in which they are attuned to things:

Were we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes from these of apprehending our experiences. It might be too (we can not dogmatically deny this) that such categories, unimaginable to us today, would have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those which we actually use.

(1907/1981: p. 79)²⁷

James also acknowledges that a plurality of different human concerns could serve to 'make' conceptual universes differently, as reality is flexible enough to be shaped into all sorts of different patterns; 'in many familiar objects every one will recognize the human element. We conceive a given reality in this way or in that, to suit our purpose, and the reality passively submits to the conception' (1907/1981: p. 113). Indeed, the predominance of certain patterns over others is, according to James, not primarily a mark of their superior rationality or better fit with the world, but a symptom of historically entrenched common sense and the feeling of coherence that accompanies familiar categories (1907/1981: Chapter V). The stability of conceptual patterns that we rely on all the time and, in so doing, take as a given is largely explicable in historical terms. They are inherited, elaborated and become increasingly entrenched.

James does not intend his account of pluralistic world-constitution to apply only to abstract theoretical constructs but also to the everyday experiential world that we take for granted, to all intentional objects and relations between them. James claims that no world-experience is simply a result of our perceptual representations 'conforming' to things outside. All objects of experience, whether encountered through everyday perception or from a theoretical standpoint, incorporate our own variable contributions into their structure and are thus partially 'made' by us:

even in the field of sensation, our minds exert a certain arbitrary choice. By our inclusions and omissions we trace the field's extent; by our emphasis we mark its foreground and its background; by our order we read it in this direction or in that. We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves.

(1907/1981: pp. 111–12)

Intentionality is conceptualized in practical terms, as an orientation that does not merely reveal but also differently configures the experienced world. Given this, one can see why affect, for James, is not something distinct from intentionality, peripheral to cognition, trivial or epiphenomenal. The experienced world reflects a background practical orientation from which affect is inextricable. Feelings of bodily states contribute to the way in which the world appears.

James not only puts forward a philosophical position. He also applies this position to philosophy itself, and nowhere is his account of the role of emotion better illustrated than in his discussion of philosophizing. Philosophers, like everybody else, approach the world through backgrounds of affect. These, James argues, are partially constitutive of the conceptions of world that they formulate. As James remarks in 'The Sentiment of Rationality', a philosopher judges a conception of the world by 'certain subjective

marks by which it affects him' (1897/1956: p. 63). He does not claim that these 'subjective marks' serve merely to steer a philosopher towards one coherent world-view rather than another. They are intrinsic to the perceived coherence of a philosophical position, to the sense of that position. But what are these 'subjective marks?' Again, James rejects the view that cognition is a detached, neutral process, impervious to the influence of affect:

Pretend what we may, the whole man within us is at work when we form our philosophical opinions – Intellect, will, taste, and passion co-operate just as they do in practical affairs.

(1897/1956: p. 92).

In so doing, he assigns a key role to affect in the formulation of world-views. A philosophical conception of the world is held together by 'a strong feeling of ease, peace, rest' and 'relief' (1897/1956: p. 63). As James remarks, 'nothing could be more absurd than to hope for the definitive triumph of any philosophy which should refuse to legitimate, and to legitimate in an emphatic manner, the more powerful of our emotional and practical tendencies' (1897/1956: p. 63). Use of the term 'absurd' suggests something stronger than just 'inadvisable' or 'mistaken', and I think that this is no accident; if our emotional tendencies are partially constitutive of the philosophies we formulate, any philosophy that did not satisfy some such set of tendencies would indeed be an incoherent enterprise. Feelings, according to James, play a kind of presuppositional role in constituting the conceptual universes that philosophers inhabit, which draw their very sense of coherence from an affective orientation.

This view is readily apparent in *Pragmatism*, where James comments on the role of 'temperaments' (which I take to be emotional dispositions) in philosophical inquiry. The philosopher, we are told:

trusts his temperament. Wanting a universe that suits it, he believes in any representation of the universe that does suit it. He feels men of opposite temper to be out of key with the world's character, and in his heart considers them incompetent and 'not in it', in the philosophical business, even though they may far excel him in dialectical ability.

(1907/1981: p. 8)

He also remarks that different philosophical temperaments amount to different world-making tendencies, around which different conceptualizations crystallize. For instance, James says of McTaggart:

When Mr McTaggart himself believes that the universe is run by the dialectical energy of the absolute idea, his insistent desire to have a world of that sort is felt by him to be no chance example of desire in general, but an altogether peculiar *insight-giving passion* to which, in this if no other instance, he would be *stupid* not to yield.²⁸

So philosophies too are 'made' in many different possible ways, depending on how emotional dispositions bind the world together into patterns that strike one with a *feeling* of coherence, truth, rightness or accord. Given this presuppositional emotional work, James observes that a philosopher can strike one as 'out of key' with the world, whatever that individual's 'dialectical ability'.²⁹ Again we see the claim that all rational deliberation presupposes an experiential world, which is partly constituted by affect.

James regards the emotions, not merely as a useful category carved out within a pre-made world but as an essential ingredient in world-making.³⁰ This ultimately entails that his philosophical account has a kind of priority over his earlier physiological claims. As already explained, James remarks that different affective dispositions will constitute different 'world-formulas'. Hence he acknowledges a plurality of conceptualizations that might form the backdrop for various different practices. He is also explicit in claiming that scientific conceptualizations are not in any sense privileged over the conceptual frameworks that comprise the commonsense backdrop for everyday behaviours. They just presuppose different purposes and concerns:

Every way of classifying a thing is but a way of handling it for some particular purpose. Conceptions, 'kinds', are teleological instruments. No abstract concept will be a valid substitute for a concrete reality except with reference to a particular interest in the conceiver. The interest of theoretic rationality, the relief of identification, is but one of a thousand human purposes.

(1897/1956: p. 70)

It follows that any scientific account, including James's own, is but one of a plurality of different formulas, gelling only with certain concerns. Indeed, James (1890) explicitly endorses a certain degree of pluralism in relation to the scientific study of emotion, remarking that various attempts to classify the emotions get us nowhere, contingent as they are on various different purposes, none of which are objectively more legitimate than others:

If then we should seek to break the emotions, thus enumerated, into groups, according to their affinities, it is again plain that all sorts of groupings would be possible, according as we chose this character or

that as a basis, and that all groupings would be equally real and true. The only question would be, does this grouping or that suit our purpose best?

(1890/1907: p. 485)

However, he also appears to suggest a generic role for the emotions, not as mere constituents of made-worlds, but as a condition of possibility for world-experience. Emotions effectively amount to – though James would hate the term – *a transcendental precondition* for the variously constituted worlds that form the backdrop for deliberation and action.³¹ They can be categorized in various different ways, but are themselves pre-conceptual, a constituent of all world-making.³² Hence James's philosophy is importantly prior to his science, in putting forward a view of how scientific ontologies function, according to which emotions underlie and structure the various conceptualizations that scientists employ. It can, I suggest, provide a coherent interpretive backdrop for his physiological claims, a conceptual universe that rejects the separation of cognition from affect.

To summarize, interpreting James (1884, 1890) in the light of his later philosophy suggests an account according to which:

- 1 Emotions are feelings of bodily changes, which are triggered reflexively during perception.
- 2 These feelings are partly constitutive of a practical orientation towards things.
- 3 This practical orientation structures all experience and conceptualization.
- 4 Emotions are thus a constituent of intentionality, which is construed as a practical orientation, rather than a matter of the disinterested representation of things external to us.

The view I have outlined is similar in many ways to certain 'cognitive' accounts put forward in explicit opposition to James. But it avoids problems faced by such accounts that stem from their failure to acknowledge bodily feelings as a central ingredient of emotion. For example, Solomon, like James, assigns emotions a sort of world-making role, arguing that 'through our passions, we constitute our (subjective) world, render it meaningful and with it our lives and our Selves'. Emotions are 'not occurrences but activities; they are not "inside" our minds but rather the structures we place *in our world*' (1976/1993: p. 108). His account has been criticized for both its marginalization of bodily feelings and its phenomenologically implausible emphasis on the extent to which we choose our emotions.³³ By incorporating affect into intentionality, James avoids the neglect of bodily feelings. And he also has an answer to the question of whether emotions are passive events

or active choices. James might seem to reject Solomon's claim that emotions are choices that we make, only to slide into the equally implausible opposite extreme of maintaining that emotions are passive events that wash over us:

[Emotions are] almost always non-logical and beyond our control. How can the moribund old man reason back to himself the romance, the mystery, the imminence of great things with which our old earth tingled for him in the days when he was young and well?

(1902: p. 151)

However, given the account I have sketched, it is clear that James's view is not that emotions are passive in a sense to be set apart from and contrasted with active choice. Rather, emotions are passive constituents of active choice making. This is illustrated by his discussion in *The Will to Believe*, where it is argued that choice can be paralysed without the contribution of passive affects. James thus recognizes that emotions are not passive in a sense that alienates them from choice. At the same time, he circumvents the phenomenological implausibility of the claim that emotions are themselves invariably choices, by maintaining that they are constituents rather than objects of choice. James's account also has certain similarities with the Sartrean view, according to which emotions are world-transforming choices that we make in order to avoid certain actions. Sartre, unlike Solomon, does emphasize the role of the body in world-making, claiming that emotions 'are tantamount to setting up a magical world by using the body as a means of incantation' (1990: 236–7). But Sartre's account still faces the charge of phenomenological implausibility, in its construal of emotions as unacknowledged *choices*. Again, this can be resolved if emotions are construed as essential ingredients, rather than objects, of active choice. This is not to say that we *never* choose our emotions or that we have absolutely no control over them. After all, James (1884: 197) claims that we can, to an extent, control our bodily states (and presumably our environment) and, in so doing, provide the conditions for the experience of certain emotions. Entailed by this is the claim that we can, to some extent, choose the worlds we make. We can seek out the conditions that bring forth certain feelings and thus strengthen or erode certain conceptions of things.

There are also some interesting parallels between James and phenomenological thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty remarks that 'prior to stimuli and sensory contents, we must recognize a kind of inner diaphragm which determines, infinitely more than they do, what our reflexes and perceptions will be able to aim at in the world, the arena of our possible operations, the scope of our life' (1962: p. 79). In other words, bodily capabilities structure experience in a manner that rejects a clear distinction between the 'cognitive' and the 'corporeal'. And James's

view of emotion is similar, in many respects, to Heidegger's conception of mood in *Being and Time* and 'What is Metaphysics?'. Heidegger, like James, reconstrues intentionality in terms of purposes and practical concerns, an orientation through which the world shows up. Moods are an inextricable aspect of this world-orientation; they are a background that gives sense to all our practical and theoretical dealings with things. For Heidegger, we do not 'represent' the world in some abstract, detached manner but are in commerce with it, teleologically entwined and inseparable from it, with moods playing an essential role in constituting our everyday familiarity with things. Mood is, for Heidegger, transcendently prior to the myriad different theoretical systems that we construct, a pre-given 'horizon' from which they draw their sense.³⁴

In conclusion, James's account of emotion is very different from the view that many philosophers take him to hold. The view sketched need not be accepted or rejected in its entirety. One could accept a Jamesian reconceptualization of intentionality, and the consequent reuniting of cognition and affect, without accepting all aspects of the later James's pragmatism. As comparison with philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger might suggest, James's pragmatism is by no means the only kind of philosophical perspective through which such a theory might be formulated. In addition, it could well be that the role James ascribes to emotions will be applicable only in certain cases. But whatever we ultimately draw from James, it is clear that this alleged turkey of an account has greater affinities with the 'goose which lays the golden eggs' (1890/1907: p.449), to which he himself compared it.³⁵

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Notes

- 1 See Viney (1992: pp. 243–4) for references to other writings in which James discusses emotion.
- 2 My criticisms are directed primarily at philosophers working on the emotions, rather than scholars of James, who are often more charitable towards his account. For example, Myers (1986: p. 242) notes that James does not always adopt a clear distinction between cognition and affect. Cooper (2002: p. 74) rejects the oft-held view that emotions, on James's account, are trivial by-products of behaviour and also emphasizes the unity and coherence of James's philosophy.
- 3 For example, I will be drawing from 'The Sentiment of Rationality' (included in James, 1897). This is composed of material from an article of the same title which appeared in *Mind* (1879) and from an address James presented to the Harvard Philosophical Club in 1880. Its content coheres well with many of the themes of the later *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and *Pragmatism* (1907).
- 4 I will use the term 'cognitive' to refer to both intentional states, such as perceptions, and deliberative processes. I will suggest that, according to James, emotions are inextricable constituents of the former and, in this role, structure the latter.
- 5 See also James, 1890/1907: p. 449.

- 6 For convenience, in discussing James, I will treat ‘affect’ as synonymous with ‘feeling of certain kinds of bodily changes’ and will treat both as interchangeable with ‘emotion’. Though others might distinguish between these terms, no clear demarcation is evident in James’s work.
- 7 For example, de Sousa (1990: p. 52) remarks that ‘James’s theory is often assumed to have been decisively refuted’ by recent physiological evidence.
- 8 See Griffiths (1997: pp. 81–4) for a comprehensive summary of the various objections to Schachter and Singer’s claims.
- 9 One of Damasio’s modifications of the original Jamesian view is his claim that many emotional states involve ‘virtual’ rather than ‘actual’ representations of body states by the brain (2000: p. 288).
- 10 Damasio (2000: pp. 59–62) claims that the brain areas involved in processing emotions include sub-cortical structures such as the brain-stem, hypothalamus, basal forebrain and especially the amygdala, in addition to cortical areas such as parts of the anterior cingulate region and ventromedial pre-frontal region. He remarks that ‘there is no single brain center for processing emotions but rather discrete systems related to separate emotional patterns’ (p. 62).
- 11 For example, Sutherland (2001: p. 81) observes that almost all the articles published so far in the journal *Consciousness and Emotion* dutifully cite Damasio’s two books.
- 12 Many recent discussions of emotion refer briefly to James’s theory as though it were exhausted by his discussion of the physiology of emotion. See, for example, LeDoux and Phelps (2000: p. 157) and Cacioppo et al. (2000: p. 174).
- 13 James’s theory is often associated with that of C. G. Lange. Hence the James–Lange theory. My emphasis throughout will be exclusively on James, given the goal of elaborating the theory through a consideration of his broader philosophical position.
- 14 In fact, the interpretation of James’s theory that I will propose here has much in common with the position that Downing himself gestures towards, in stressing the inextricability of intentionality and bodily capacities.
- 15 Gordon’s (1987) chapter on James and Schachter is entitled ‘The Trivialization of Emotions’.
- 16 Goldie and Spicer attribute such distinctions to a more general mind/matter dualism that impedes philosophical theories of the emotions. They claim that emotions are philosophically troublesome precisely because they challenge the legitimacy of commonplace demarcations between mental and physical: ‘If one begins one’s inquiries into the emotions with a prior conception of the distinction between mind and matter – one of which we are supposed to have a clear grasp – one will come to find the questions pressing of which is mental and which is physical and of how the two can be “united”. Whereas if one instead considers the emotions in their own right, such questions become secondary, as they surely should’ (2002: p. 4). For the purposes of this paper, I restrict myself to the more specific opposition between cognition and affect.
- 17 There are many similarities between this position and that of Damasio (1995, 2000). Damasio claims that ‘preorganized mechanisms are important not just for basic biological regulation. They also help the organism classify things or events as “good” or “bad” because of their possible impact on survival. In other words, the organism has a basic set of preferences – or criteria, biases, or values. Under their influence and the agency of experience, the repertoire of things categorized as good or bad grows rapidly, and the ability to detect new good and bad things grows exponentially’ (p. 117). Damasio distinguishes between primary and secondary emotions, the former of which are hard-wired (e.g. fear of heights)

- whilst the latter involve learned associations between perceptions and feelings (e.g. a distaste for ice cream).
- 18 As will become increasingly apparent when I turn to James's philosophical writings, his view of the organism–environment relationship does not conform to a traditional lock and key construal of organisms and niches but is closer to Lewontin's (1978, 1982) view, according to which organisms 'construct' rather than 'fit into' their environments. Their evolved needs and capacities bind together salient environmental features into a niche, which is created as much as it is discovered.
 - 19 Again echoing James, Damasio asserts that 'contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other percepts' (1995: p. xv).
 - 20 See Stocker and Hegeman (1996) for a compelling account of possible evaluative roles for the emotions.
 - 21 Vallelonga (1992: pp. 236–7) accuses James of explicitly enforcing an artificial Cartesian schism between affect and cognition. However, Viney, in the same volume, suggests that 'a careful reading of the *Principles* and the later philosophical work shows that James recognized the artificiality of sharp distinctions between emotion and thinking' (1992: pp. 246–7).
 - 22 Averill (1992) argues that James's remarks on emotion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* comprise a distinct theory from that set out by James, 1884, 1890, the former being a 'dead end' (p. 222). In drawing such a firm line between the two, Averill relies on a very uncharitable reading of James, 1884, 1890.
 - 23 William Styron's *Darkness Visible* is a more recent autobiographical account of the experience of depression, which also reports the total withdrawal of world-meaning, in a way that is phenomenologically indissociable from a feeling of emotional 'pain'.
 - 24 A correlation between depression, lack of affective response to stimuli and altered world-experience is reported by several recent discussions. For example, Gerrans (2000) suggests that global suppression of affect is characteristic of severe depression and that this loss of affect is itself the source of both experiential distortions, such as feelings of 'derealization', 'depersonalisation' or 'disembodiment' (pp. 111–12), and abnormal reasoning processes (pp. 116–17). He proposes that an extreme combination of these effects can account for the Cotard's Delusion, characterized by a subject's firmly and sincerely held belief that she is dead. See also Ratcliffe (2004) for a discussion of Cotard's delusion, affect and the sense of reality.
 - 25 I am suggesting that, on James's view, bodily feelings *are* intrinsic to the 'form of representation'.
 - 26 James's view has more in common with the proposal put forward by Roberts (1988) that emotions are 'concern-based construals' (p. 191), which are not interpretations laid over pre-cognized objects 'but a *characterization of the object*, a way the object presents itself' (pp. 191–2). Like James, Roberts argues that emotions are intrinsic to the structure of intentionality. However, Roberts argues that bodily feelings are not sufficient to capture the full sense of 'emotion', even though they are incorporated into construals (p. 207). In reconceptualizing intentionality, James's view renders it more plausible that bodily feelings are rich enough to accommodate the role of emotion in structuring construals. It is also arguable that identification of emotion with bodily feelings might extricate Roberts from the objection, which he himself addresses (p. 202), that defining 'emotion' in terms of 'concern' is circular.
 - 27 Damasio echoes James, in claiming that 'if our organisms were designed differently, the constructions we make of the world around us would be different as

- well. We do not know, and it is improbable that we will ever know, what “absolute” reality is like’ (1995: p. 97), suggesting, perhaps inadvertently, that his neurophysiological account of emotion will itself rest on categories that draw their sense from a contingent set of organismic concerns.
- 28 ‘Abstractionism and “Relativismus”’, in *The Meaning of Truth* (1909/1970: pp. 246–71).
- 29 Taken as an empirical claim, this aspect of James’s view may have a certain appeal to those who have noticed the level of emotion that sometimes arises during philosophical discussions or felt an intangible sense of disconnection with a fellow philosopher, whilst both parties desperately formulate arguments to which the other is utterly impervious. Sometimes philosophers simply pass each other by in the night.
- 30 Goodman’s (e.g. 1978, 1984) account of emotion and world-making is very close to that of James. Indeed, the term ‘world-making’ is most often associated with Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), though it applies equally well to James. Goodman endorses a plurality of made worlds and suggests that emotions ‘are among the primary means of making the discriminations and the connections that enter into an understanding of art. Emotion and feeling [...] function cognitively in aesthetic and in much other experience’ (1984: pp. 7–8). Playing on Kant, he goes on to remark that ‘feeling without understanding is blind, and understanding without feeling is empty’ (p. 8).
- 31 Many recent authors have claimed that the emotions do not constitute a ‘natural kind’. Rorty remarks that they are a ‘heterogeneous group’ (1980: p. 1); Griffiths proposes a ‘three-way fracturing of the emotion category into socially sustained pretenses, affect program responses and higher cognitive states’ (1997: p. 17) and Elster suggests that emotion categories are not culturally universal (1999: Chapter IV). James’s pluralism does not quite map on to these concerns, as he rejects the idea of ‘natural kinds’ altogether. However, in identifying all emotions with bodily feelings and assigning them a generic world-making role, he does appear to regard the emotions as a unitary group. Perhaps the emotions form a coherent, useful, unitary category, given the context of James’s own philosophical concerns.
- 32 A helpful recent comparison may be Elster’s distinction between pre-conceptual ‘proto-emotions’, which are universal, and the diversity of ‘proper emotions’ that emerge from different schemes of classification and serve to conceptualize the various proto-emotions differently (1999: Chapter IV).
- 33 See Griffiths (1997: pp. 27–30) for a comprehensive summary of the various objections faced by Solomon’s theory.
- 34 See Ratcliffe (2002) for a discussion of Heidegger’s account of moods and affective ‘attunement’ (*Befindlichkeit*). This article also argues that Heidegger’s account can serve as a fruitful interpretive framework for recent neurological studies of the emotions, such as those of Damasio (1995, 2000).
- 35 I am grateful to Paul Griffiths, Norman Sieroka, an anonymous referee and audiences at University College Cork and the University of Durham for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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