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'Looking for Spinoza': The Source of Emotion

By COLIN McGINN

Once scientists returned, at last, to the study of consciousness it was only a matter of time before emotions engaged their attention, not just emotional behavior, but the inner conscious feelings that accompany it: experiences of fear, anger, sadness, joy and more. These, after all, are mainly what constitute human well-being, so it would be nice to understand them, particularly as they relate to the brain, where the mechanics lie. Antonio Damasio, chief neurologist at the University of Iowa Medical Center, is a leader in this developing field, having written two well-regarded books on emotions and the brain: "Descartes' Error" and "The Feeling of What Happens." Now, in "Looking for Spinoza," he sets out to explain what precisely an emotion is, and what parts of the brain give rise to emotions of different kinds. Spinoza, the enigmatic 17th-century philosopher, enters the story because of his interest in emotion and will, and his foreshadowing of the theory Damasio favors.

Damasio advances three central claims. The first is that emotions do not cause their bodily symptoms but are caused by the symptoms: we do not cry because we are sad; we are sad because we cry. The emotional behavior comes first, causally and in evolution, with the conscious feelings a later byproduct: "feelings . . . are mostly shadows of the external manner of emotions," he writes.

The second claim is that an emotional feeling is identical to the bodily sensations that manifest it: "A feeling in essence is an idea -- an idea of the body and, even more particularly, an idea of a certain aspect of the body, its interior, in certain circumstances. A feeling of emotion is an idea of the body when it is perturbed by the emoting process." The thought here is that an emotion, say fear of being attacked by a bear, consists simply of the awareness one has of the bodily symptoms of the emotion -- the racing heart, the adrenaline release, the sweaty palms, the tensed muscles.

Damasio's third claim is that this theory of emotion generalizes to all mental states -- they all consist of varying types of bodily awareness: "The mind is built from ideas that are, in one way or another, brain representations of the body." Taken together, these claims make the body the central locus of the mind. The mind is not just embodied; it is about the body. Its purpose and essence is to regulate and represent the state of the body. Damasio approvingly quotes Spinoza's pithy formulation: "The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body."

I have two things to say about this theory: it is unoriginal, and it is false. As anyone even remotely familiar with this topic is aware, what Damasio presents here is known as the "James-Lange" theory of emotion, after the two psychologists, William James and Carl G. Lange, who thought of it independently in the 1880's. Not once does Damasio refer to it by this name, and he makes only very cursory reference to James's version of the theory. He generally writes as if he were advancing a startling discovery, mere hints of which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be extracted from Spinoza and James. In fact, the theory is a standard chestnut of psychology textbooks, a staple of old-style behaviorist psychology, with its emphasis on outer behavior at the expense of inner feeling.

The errors of the theory are chiefly those of exaggeration. While it is a truism that whistling a happy tune can improve your mood so that external actions can initiate a change of emotional state, it by no means follows that feelings play no causal role in the production of behavior. And it is quite clear that an emotion can shape the course of a person's actions over time, as when someone stays in bed all day because he feels depressed. We do often cry because we are sad -- even though the crying can work to augment the feeling. There is causal interplay between feelings and their bodily expression, rather than a one-way dependence. The fact, cited by Damasio, that a bodily fear response can precede a conscious feeling of fear does not show that once the feeling is present it has no causal control over behavior -- and it clearly does, as with fleeing and hiding.

What about the idea that an emotion is a bodily perception? Suppose I am delighted that my son has become a doctor. I may have various sensations in my body that express this emotion -- say, lightness in my limbs and a warm feeling in my viscera. But the object of my delight is not my body; it is my son's success. My bodily sensations are directed to my body and my emotion is directed to my son. Therefore my emotion cannot be identical to my bodily sensations -- for the two have different objects. This refutes the James-Lange theory.

As Wittgenstein remarks in his classic discussion of this theory, the horribleness of my grief when someone I love dies cannot be explained as the horribleness of the sensations I feel in my body. It results, rather, from the horribleness of what my grief is about; my bodily sensations may not be particularly horrible in themselves. Nor do we try to assuage someone's grief by attending to her bodily sensations; instead we talk about what she is grieving over. The James-Lange theory fails because it ignores what philosophers call the intentionality of emotion -- that is, what emotions are about, their representational content, which are generally things outside the body. The theory tries to reduce an emotion to its sensory bodily symptoms, but these symptoms have the wrong kind of intentionality: the state of the body, not the state of the external world.

But if emotion is just perception of the body, why isn't simple awareness of the body's position and temperature (proprioception) invariably accompanied by corresponding emotions? An emotion is a type of feeling (fear or joy, for example), directed toward a particular external object, with certain sorts of bodily expression. It is not simply reducible to the bodily expressions alone (that's why we call them merely "expressions"). Nothing in Damasio's book ever comes to grips with these not-so-subtle, and well-known, objections to the theory he is promoting.

The final, grand claim of the book is simply absurd: that all mental states are perceptions of the body. Damasio is aware that readers may find this view a shade paradoxical: "The statement departs radically from traditional wisdom and may sound implausible at first glance. We usually regard our mind as populated by images or thoughts of objects, actions and abstract relations, mostly related to the outside world rather than to our bodies." Indeed we do. We usually suppose that we see things outside us, as well as seeing our own body; and we suppose the other senses work likewise. We also suppose that our thoughts manage to be about the world beyond our bodies. Yet we are solemnly assured that science refutes this "traditional wisdom."

What has really happened is that Damasio has made an elementary confusion, and that infects his entire discussion. It is true that whenever there is a change in our mental state there is a change in the state of our body, and that this bodily state is the ground

or mechanism that makes the mental state possible. But it is a gross non sequitur to infer that the mental state is about this bodily state. When I see a bird in the distance my retina and cortex are altered accordingly; however, that doesn't mean that I don't really see the bird but only my retina and cortex. The body is indeed the basis of my mind's ideas, but it is not their object. Once again Damasio has neglected the intentionality of mental states, with grotesque consequences. Moreover, this generalized view would obliterate his theory of the emotions, since it would convert every mental state into an emotion, given that emotions are defined as "ideas of the body."

"Looking for Spinoza" is at its best in presenting empirical findings on how the brain processes emotion, along with some of the strange emotional deficits that can result from localized brain damage -- as with patients who lose "social emotions" like sympathy and embarrassment. Here Damasio's scientific expertise serves him well. But, as a scientist, he feels professionally equipped to discuss more philosophical matters, and in this domain there is a fatal lack of conceptual sophistication. I admire his effort to bring together science and philosophy, but they sit uneasily together here (he certainly seems unaware of much relevant philosophical material). There is also a lack of straightforwardness about much of the writing, a kind of clotted coyness, which serves to mask the implausibility of the views being propounded. The biographical sections on Spinoza are engaging enough, but often seem tacked on and unnecessarily personal.

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