

WHAT IS EMOTION?

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Emotion is one of those terms we use so familiarly that we seldom ask what they really mean. Let the reader try to compose a definition which would help anyone to identify the phenomena referred to. Let him see how little help is to be found in a dictionary.

The difficulty is not entirely due to ignorance. We now have an astonishing welter of detailed fact about emotional behavior, particularly in childhood and in many abnormal conditions. When, however, we try to organize these facts in a coherent pattern, we run into many perplexities. Indeed some psychologists believe that the kinds of behavior traditionally called emotional are so diverse that they cannot be usefully treated together. This article is an attempt, however, to classify these behaviors in a meaningful way and for the intelligent layman.

A useful treatment of the subject must begin, however, by changing the form of question usually asked. The older psychology began by asking "what is in our consciousness or mind during emotion?" This approach has on the whole proved rather sterile, particularly in child psychology. Contemporary scientific psychology no longer asks about the "contents of consciousness" nor even about "what's in your mind" (though the Freudian movement unfortunately often uses such a phraseology). Instead, it asks what people do and why and how. We must ask, then, what it is that we *do* when we emote.

The verb, to emote, finds no place as yet in the dictionary. Such a term is, however, sadly needed, not only for its convenience but in recognition of the shift in emphasis in psychology from a study of "mental contents" (represented by nouns) to a study of activities (best represented by verbs). When old terms fail to express our meaning, we have two choices: to put forward a neologism constructed according to etymological "rules," or to hunt for an acceptable current expression. The fact that "emote" is already in wide use as slang and is immediately understood indicates that it is in accord with the genius of the language. The step from slang to propriety should therefore be easy—and much preferable to the invention of a term which would need not only defense but explanation.

THE COMPONENTS OF EMOTING

Emoting, it is sufficiently obvious, is a complex tangle of personal activities. Our initial task is therefore to seek the component parts of this complex behavior.

1. The first thing we do when we emote—at least, usually—is to perceive or imagine the emotive situation or object. This is so obvious that it is usually ignored—to the serious damage of our thinking about the subject. Perhaps this is because in emotion we often do not specifically attend to the object nor think about it; and sometimes we do not even realize that it is this object with which our emoting is connected. But awareness of the emotive situation does happen.

2. Then we do something to *alter* or *control* the external circumstances which constitute the emotive situation. If we consider an object fearsome, we flee from it or endeavor in some other way to rid ourselves of it. If we are angry we no less obviously endeavor to alter the object or situation by "attacking" it. If our feeling is of the pleasant variety our effort may be rather to maintain and cherish than to remove the object of emoting. Yet even here we also "alter" it—as when we eat a luscious tidbit or pet a cat or dog. In all cases we make, or at least tend to make, an objective or *external adaptation* or *adjustment*, an adjustment directed toward the emotive situation or some object in it.

In the infant these movements of external adaptation are very confused and chaotic, and differ little from one sort of situation to another. Even so, there is activity directed outward upon the environment, as when an obnoxious stimulus leads to squirming or thrashing about. As the child grows older, the action tends to become less "all-over," more precisely adjusted to the kind of situation, more differentiated and adaptive. But always there is a great deal of ill-coordinated movement in emoting. These external adjustments are accomplished by tugging at our bones with the so-called striped muscles. Many psychologists have therefore followed the lead of the anatomist and physiologist in calling them skeletal responses; since, however, there are other skeletal responses with a somewhat different function, the usage is rather unfortunate as far as psychology is concerned.

Not to recognize these outwardly directed actions as an *essential* part of emotional behavior is to lose an important clue to understanding the problem. Particularly is this true in childhood. Unfortunately, such recognition is not always forthcoming. Laymen and psychologists alike often speak of these responses as if they were something tacked on, a sort of result or sequel of emotion. As we shall see later, this leaves us with an incomplete picture.

3. The ancients localized the several emotions in the internal organs: the heart was the organ of love, the spleen of anger, the bowels of pity and yearning, and so on. They were partly correct. What we may call the "Department of the Interior" must indeed be heard from. In every emoting some at least of our glands (of which we now hear so much) are directly involved; and, since the glands are intimately interconnected, it is probable that nearly all of them are active in some way in each case.

Then, too, the muscles of the genito-urinary tract, and those lining the walls of the digestive tract—"smooth" muscles the anatomist calls them—are involved in characteristic ways. The diaphragm and breathing are affected, and there are striking changes in the circulation of the blood in response to varied heart action and to changes in the tension of the arterial walls in different parts of the body. Even when emoting rather mildly we are apt to be considerably "stirred up inside."

Psychologically, these responses may be considered as a sort of *internal adaptation* to the emotive situation just as the skeletal responses constitute an external adjustment. There is much controversy, however, as to whether these internal responses should be considered adaptive or helpful. In some cases they seem to prepare the individual for external adjustments to come. In other cases, however, the internal responses, especially if violent, tend to interfere with and disrupt the external adjustment. Our own use of the term adaptation is not intended to prejudge the issue as to whether the internal response is helpful. It merely calls attention to the fact that these internal reactions are changes in the individual with reference to the emotive situation, and hence are a sort of adaptation to it, though possibly not a good one. Nearly all of these reactions are controlled by the autonomic nervous system, and some writers therefore call this aspect of emoting "autonomic response." But there are other autonomic activities, which, so far as we know, play no part in emoting, so the usage is a little dubious. The term "visceral response," which is even more common, is open to the same objection. Moreover, arterial changes are not strictly visceral. We prefer the term "internal responses."

4. For the next class of responses which we make when emoting, we may follow an old tradition in speaking of the "*expressive movements*." To this class belong scowling, smiling, tightening the jaw, clenching teeth or fist, gesturing, perspiring, blushing, blanching, gooseflesh, and various tense and relaxed postures. Here also belong verbal interjections: groans, sighs, exclamations of surprise, pain, anger, or horror; and cries of pleasure and joy as well.

All these are usually called expressions of emotion as if the emotion were one thing and the expressions another. But these responses are truly *part* of what we do when emoting, not something distinct or added on. Indeed no emotion is quite complete without them. Try, for example, to enjoy a beautiful scene or great music without making any such reactions. Or note how great fear is lessened if there are few "expressions" of fear.

Darwin believed that all these "expressions" were vestiges of earlier adaptive responses—we bare the teeth in anger, he thought, because we are getting ready literally to bite. Today few accept his view except in a very general form. These responses serve our adaptation to the emotive situation in a quite different way. Essentially they are a sort of *emotional language* and work upon other persons in the situation. The bared teeth may frighten off the anger-arousing person, the cry of pain may bring help or enlist sympathy. The expressive reactions are primarily social adjustments.

5. Similarly social are certain forms of *verbal activity* which form part of emotional behavior. We threaten, cajole, plead, banter, verbally caress, coax, command, and otherwise attempt by our words to influence the persons who form part of our emotional situation. Such verbal conduct while very similar to the interjections of section 4, is not so primitive as other parts of emotion and often seems not to integrate or "tie in" closely with the rest. For this reason it seems better to make a distinct class for it. No catalog of the forms of emotional activity would, however, be complete without listing these language responses.

6. Lastly, we may distinguish an important but little regarded group of responses. This is the verbal response of naming the emotional behavior. This naming is not always audible; we say to ourselves: "Oh, I'm so happy," "Angry enough to bite nails," "Down-in-the-mouth." Infants and animals of course have no such reactions and they are often lacking in children or adults. Indeed sometimes we cannot name our feelings at all, somewhat to our discomfiture. But what we may call the "*secondary naming*" is a genuine part of many emotional behaviors.

Readers with some acquaintance with physiology and anatomy may be distressed by the proposed classification of emotional behaviors. These sciences recognize three broad classes of reaction: those of the striped or skeletal muscles, those of the smooth muscles, and those of the glands of internal or external secretion. Our classification obviously cuts clear across this pattern. The external adjustment responses of our Class 2 are skeletal, but do not include all of the skeletal movements. The internal adjustment of Class 3 includes smooth muscle responses and both types of glandular responses; but again it is very doubtful that all such responses are involved in emoting. As for the expressive movements (Class 4), here is, *physiologically* considered, confusion for sure: skeletal responses (as in clenching the fist or scowling), smooth muscles (as in blushing), and glands of external secretion (as in dry mouth, weeping, perspiring). Some of these reactions belong to the cerebro-spinal system, some to the autonomic. Vocalizing behavior, which is skeletal for the physiologist, is found in no less than three of our classes. As for our first class, the perceiving of the emotive situation, no one really knows very much as to what, in physiological terms, is going on beyond the activity of the sense organs immediately involved.

Actually such a difference between the way facts are classified in two sciences should occasion neither surprise nor concern. Every science necessarily has its own structure. The *facts* discovered in one science must be accepted by all other sciences; but the classification of the facts depends upon what one is trying to do. Indeed, the importation into a science of the concepts of another is apt to be dangerous. The unity of science is the unity of *common facts* and a *common logic*, not of a common conceptual framework.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMOTING AND OTHER ACTIONS

Here, then, are six ways of acting which in their totality constitute emoting. But what other acts do *not* show exactly the same classes of behavior? When, for example, one calmly drives an auto through a crowded street, copies a drawing of a gear wheel, or studies how to persuade the boss to give one a raise, one is not ordinarily thought of as acting emotionally, yet each of the six classes of action listed above is involved (or at least may be) in these non-emotional acts.

We could, at this point, fall back on the truism that we probably never act at all without emoting a little bit, but that would be something of an evasion. It is a fair demand that we differentiate between what we ordinarily call emotional and non-emotional action, and our analysis leaves the way open for just that differentiation. *Emoting is a complex and extended way of acting in which behavior is dominated by or integrated around the activities of internal adjustment.*

Indeed the internal or so-called visceral responses often dominate the stage so thoroughly that we tend to over-estimate their role, even to identify emoting with just that one aspect. This is a mistake. The internal component is truly a *necessary* part of any behavior we call emotional and the other parts are organized around it; but it is never the whole act.

In the first place, if we do not perceive or imagine the stimulating circumstances, the whole drama fails to unroll. The "uncaused" fears sometimes found in the insane are probably no exception, since the patient is probably reacting, directly or indirectly, to some obscure imaginary situation which he cannot name or describe. Moreover, the end of emoting comes, not when the situation actually changes, but when we perceive it in a different way.

A second difficulty is that the internal responses of different emotions seem so extraordinarily alike. Neither to introspection nor to objective measurement does the internal reaction of fear differ materially from that of anger; and the more we know about the two ways of emoting the more alike the internal responses seem to be. As far as internal adjustment goes, we seem to have but two kinds of emoting: a plus or favoring kind and a minus or rejecting kind. Now to reduce all emotion to just two certainly cannot do justice to the variety of feelings which mankind has so long celebrated in song and story; and the subtle variations are not something just tacked on but an intrinsic part of the whole pattern. To identify emoting with just its central core of internal responses is to miss the factors which differentiate one feeling from another.

Finally, to identify emoting with the internal response is to imply that the latter has significance all by itself. That is not the case. The internal reaction must be seen in relation with the other components if "emotion" is to make sense. A merely internal adaptation of a person without at least a tendency toward external adjustment—be it physical or social—is almost unthinkable, and if it were thinkable would be most injudicious. However central the internal adjustment is in emoting, we must not ignore the other components with which it is inseparably joined.

EMOTING AS AN INTEGRATION

Some of you may be inclined at this point to object to the analysis as incomplete. It is like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. What, you may ask, about the feelings, the emotions themselves? Are not all these bodily activities which we have been talking about merely the accompaniments of the emotion? No one questions, you add, that all these physiological functions of gland and muscle are somehow involved in emotion, but to say they *are* emotion is to leave out the mental or spiritual aspect which is the most important of all.

Well, it is not possible to be dogmatic here. All one can do is to ask that the objection be clearly stated. Just where *is* the feeling we have so far omitted?

Or rather, how do we do it? For it is to be remembered that our question is, What do we *do* when we emote? To say that we run, that we blush, that we exclaim, that we get all stirred up in what the Scotch call our "insides"—that is intelligible and demonstrable. Is there anything else that we do? If so, what is it?

Note that this way of looking at the matter does not deny at all that there is a specific way of acting called fearing or loving or being anxious or disgusted. It just says that fearing is the *sum-total*, or better, the *integration* of the things we demonstrably do when we fear. Joy, likewise, is just the particular combination of things done, or rather of "doings." A particular emoting, that is to say, is not something over and above the ways of acting we have listed; these in their totality *are* the emoting. Fear and anger and disgust and joy and love and happiness are simply *you in action* in as many different ways.

To say this, moreover, is not to deny to emoting spiritual value. On the contrary, to think of anger or fear or joy as *particular ways of living* seems a much richer concept than to think of them as some sort of "mental content" locked up in each individual's mind and inaccessible to anyone else save indirectly. Joy remains joy no matter how it is analyzed. Even though it be shown that what we do when we are happy is to integrate certain adaptive big-muscle movements, certain internal reactions, and certain verbal activities, happiness remains the chief, if not the only, source of human values.

We do not wish, however, to close the door to any facts. The foregoing analysis may not be complete; the way is open to any addition of a demonstrable mode of acting which takes place when we emote. The virtue of our analysis consists chiefly in that it provides us with convenient pegs whereon to hang facts of considerable value to those who must deal with the emotional problems of themselves and others.
