

T H E S I S

THE MEANING OF EMOTION AS RELATED  
TO HUMAN CONDUCT

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## Meaning of Emotion as Related to Human Conduct

### General Thesis

Emotions have meanings affecting conduct.

### Introduction

1. Recent research and limitations
2. Scope of subject

### Discussion

1. Emotion is defined and explained as to origin
2. Genesis of emotional reactions
3. Explanations of emotional reactions in the child and youth

### Conclusion

1. Unexplainable reactions and impossibility of comprehensive knowledge.
2. The vital meaning



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Until recently the psychology of states of feelings or emotions has been in what might be called a backward condition. As compared with other phases of psychology, especially in view of the importance of the part played by emotions in human life, it has scarcely received due consideration. Recent research began in the last ten years of the nineteenth century when James and Lange each independently and simultaneously promulgated their theory of the origin of emotion. Their thesis, apparently paradoxical in appearance, aroused, especially in America, many discussions, criticisms, defenses, observations and researches, and the subject still abounds with questions on which little light has been thrown. Besides to Professor James, whose thesis this paper accepts, we will also refer especially to Rebot in his treatment of the Psychology of the Emotions, Baldwin's "Mental Development", Hall's "Adolescence", Vol. II, and McKeever's "Psychology and Higher Life".

In the study of the emotions we proceed largely from two standpoints, first, internal observation, which is always an uncertain guide and leads us but a little way; second, observation of emotion in others and noting the expression which goes with it. To do this and understand the emotion rightfully in another, it is almost necessary that we should



have experienced the emotion at least once ourselves. Just as one can not understand the diseased bodily conditions of another who is enduring great bodily pain unless he has experienced like bodily conditions himself, so in any other emotion along with this in observations both of self and others, determine if possible the cause of the emotion. In this paper we shall observe particularly the expressions of emotions and as far as possible account for the specific bodily effects which various objects of environment which excite emotion may produce: hence their effect on human conduct.

Professor James defines emotion as "a tendency to feel characteristically when in the presence of a certain object of environment", hence the great variety of emotions, since every element of environment may tend to produce a different expression of emotion. As to its origin, referred to above, his theory is this:- "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". Reversing the order generally admitted by common sense, the theory maintains rather that we have: "First an intellectual state, then organic and motor disturbances and then the consciousness of these disturbances, which is the psychic state we call emotion." That is to say, because we weep we are sad; because we strike we are angry; because we run we fear.

The considerations in proof of the theory are about three: first, particular perceptions certainly do produce



widespread bodily effects by a sort of immediate physical influence, antecedent to the arousal of an emotion or an emotional "idea". Many examples might be cited, such as the instantaneous shiver produced by the hearing or reading of some thrilling deed, or if we see a dark object in the woods, the catching of the breath and stoppage of the heart beat before any actual articulate idea of danger can arise. Again in every asylum and in every case of hysteria we find examples of absolutely unmotivated bodily expressions which must be explained by the fact that the nervous machinery is so "liable" in some particular emotional direction that almost every stimulus causes it to upset in that way. Hence in the latter cases, if the person affected made sufficient effort to control the bodily expressions, the emotion would pass away.

A second consideration is this, "that we ought to be able to awaken the emotion itself by voluntarily producing the manifestations of a special emotion". Experiments along this line corroborate rather than disprove this hypothesis: Wm. M. Chamberlain, in his "Principles of Vocal Expression" says, "It must be remembered, in the discussion of all the types of emotion, that these general physical conditions which are called pantomimic expression, naturally precede and induce the corresponding tone quality, which becomes the vocal expression of the emotion". "Simply acquire and hold persistently the attitude of mind and body suited to the emotion desired to be experienced and the feeling will in time become full and natural" is the theory on which the amateur theatrical performer works and



in truth it is an established fact that the player who continuously acts a part becomes more and more the real character he impersonates. Emotion, then, can be acquired, and in view of this fact, in a child for instance who might have a certain tendency toward a good act, the opportunity to express the feeling should be given him, thus encouraging and strengthening the emotion.

The third consideration answers another objection which is that the manifestation instead of increasing it causes the emotion to disappear. The objection, however, does not discriminate between the feelings during the manifestation and those after it. In the case of laughing, the emotion exists during the manifestation and calm naturally follows afterwards from bodily exhaustion.

This theory, then, having cleared up much concerning the definition and causes of emotions, we are ready to consider certain definite questions concerning them, such as "just what changes does this object and that object excite?" and "how come they to excite these particular changes and not others"?

To account for some movements of expression Spencer probably first suggested "they may be weakened repetitions of movements which under other conditions were physiologically necessary concomitants of the useful movements". Examples of these reactions are particularly evident in the emotions of anger and fear. Just as the dog bristles up his hair and tail and shows his teeth, at the same time making extreme audible demonstrations, thus possessing an advantage over his enemy of



less expressive ability, so the angry man braces his body, clinches his fists, sets his jaws firm and makes extravagant verbal claims as to his power, thus not only giving himself the feeling of possessing unusual size and strength, but as well in the early development of the race bluffing his less demonstrative brother into submission without a fight, and carrying away captive some important prize. Again the primitive race actually fought and murdered for the purpose of obtaining a coveted prize, so the more refined anger of today, for instance in the disturbances of the respiratory function may be simply reminiscences, as it were, reverberations in the imagination of the blowings of the man making a series of combatative efforts, or in the case of fear, the pantings of one in precipitate flight.

In proof of the latter consideration subjective evidences may easily be added, as anyone can testify that anger consists of mental representations of actions and impressions that would occur while inflicting some kind of pain, while fear consists of mental representations of certain painful results, manifesting themselves in cries, efforts to escape, tremblings, pallor, heart palpitations, which are just the manifestations that go along with actual suffering of the evil feared. So with almost any other emotion.

But to return to the first consideration of revival of reactions in weakened form formerly of utility to primitive man. James sums up some of the applications made by Darwin, Wundt and others about as follows:

The symptom of a snarl or sneer is accounted for as a survival from the time when our ancestors had large canines



and unfleshed them (as dogs do now) for attack. Similarly the raising of the eyebrows in outward attention goes with the opening of the eye for better vision; the opening of the mouth with intense listening with the rapid catching of the breath preceding muscular effort which may have come from the utility of these movements in extreme cases. The distension of the nostrils in anger is interpreted as an aid to breathing to our ancestors when, during combat, the mouth was filled up by a part of an antagonist's body that had been seized. The trembling of fear is supposed to be for the sake of warming the blood. The reddening of the face and neck an arrangement by which the brain is relieved of blood pressure which the simultaneous excitement of the heart brings with it. The effusion of tears is explained, similarly, as a blood withdrawing agent. The contraction of the muscles around the eyes had a primitive use of preserving these organs from becoming too much gorged with blood during the screaming fits of infancy. This survives in adult life in the shape of a frown which comes over the brow when anything displeasing presents itself to thought or action and whereas screaming or weeping begins to be controlled at an early age, frowning is hardly ever restrained at any age.

Other expressions may be explained by what may be called "reacting similarity to analogous feeling stimuli", an evident example of which is the ordinary movement of negation, its reaction originally used by babies to prevent disagreeables from getting in their mouths so used in the adult to show aversion to any unwelcome idea. The nod forward in affirmation



is analogous to the taking of food by the child. Disgust, disdain, dislike, etc., are expressed by definite olfactory movements.

Taking up the subject of the various emotional expressions now as they are observed in the child and youth, we again find new light. Happily the child and youth appear at the truly psychological moment, freighted as they are with reminiscences of what the adult is so fast losing. They are abandoned to joy, grief, passion, fear, rage. They are bashful, show off, weep, laugh, desire, are curious, eager, regret and swell with passion. Back of them too lies the great animal world, where often each species seems essentially but a feeling instinct embodied, as the carnivora's cruelty, the rabbit's timidity, or the peacock's ostentation. Again each animal group may represent some one quality in great excess, the high selective value of which made possible the development and survival of a species, genus or group, these psychological types then cross sectioning morphological divisions of species and genera.

It is apparent then that true types of character can only be determined by studying the animal world and that man inherits traits of these group types, as the aggressiveness of the carnivora and timidity of species long preyed upon. "Each characteristic type is thus a fulfilled possibility of development in some specific direction and in man is based on unconscious instinctive, prehuman or animal traits, the elements of which are combined into aggregates of greater or less cohesion according to age or persistence in time, etc.," says Hall. To infer that we have a trait of more or less typical value, then, we must



supplement this above consideration first, by an independent study of the forms of degeneration and second, of the traits and dispositions in normal persons, forming conclusions from the occurrence of all these classes of data, always keeping in mind the facts of environment which play the all important part all through.

To quote from Hall again, he says, "We really know things only when we trace their development from the farthest beginning through all their stages to maximal maturity and decay. Thus we shall never truly know ourselves until we know the mind of animals, and most especially those in our line of descent. . . . Mind and life are one and inseparable. Soul is thus at bottom homogeneous and also continuous throughout the animal kingdom, the chief differences being in degree and proportion. There are as many types of mind as of body, and vice versa, we can truly know soul only through the body, and conversely, can know body only through the soul. . . . Whatever soul stuff may or may not be, it is most susceptible and responsive to all present influences, and also, in a yet deeper sense, most pervaded with reverberations from an immeasurable past. . . . From this it follows that much if not most soul is lost. With every extinct species of animal life a soul type also vanishes irrecoverably from the world, and as dead far outnumber living varieties, the great body of soul is irrecoverable by psychologists; thus the world of soul must remain fragmentary and many faculties, traits and genetic stages are gone forever."

With this standpoint in mind let us now consider some



of the particular emotional changes which mark adolescence and as far as possible explain them. At this period individual differences of all kinds are suddenly augmented and the youth realizes that he has a rank in the world and is eager to stand high and not low in the world's estimation. Each sex also feels rated by the other and the approval of a larger and more adult environment is sought. The result is a greatly intensified social self consciousness which may be expressed in bashfulness, showing off or affectation, according to temperament, environment, etc. One of the first of these self ratings in girls concerns gifts of heredity. They discuss eyes, hair, complexion and form and study to show or conceal the good or bad that comes of inheritance and environment thus far. Much more than boys, they are conscious of ancestors, parents, relatives, and this normally because their bodies and minds are in a sense better organs of heredity than man's. The consciousness of clothes becomes prominent in both boys and girls. The influence of dress upon behavior is now given a place in ethical textbooks. The maxim often advocated of so dressing wherever one is as to be utterly unconscious of dress is probably unpedagogical even more than it is at this age impossible to carry out; rather to be at one's best they must be conscious that they are dressed in the best style.

In feats, stunts and dares boys lead and are most persistent in seeking recognition. True to man's pedigree, because in primitive society the strongest was chief, they seek both distinction and victory. The instinct of self exhibition



to win commendation, of course plays an enormous role at all ages, but while impudence and the boastful lie may be forms of showing off in childhood and youth, the thoughtful man, at least in most realms of life, has a deep and basal desire to bring seeming and being into coincidence. Courting and combat particularly bring out this showing off tendency. Insects and birds as well as male wasps, butterflies, moths, fishes, frogs and snakes take interest in displaying every charm of color and form in the courting season. Primitive man is tattooed, removes hair or teeth, wears ornaments, etc., under stress of the same instinct. So men and women in the presence of the other sex strive to show their best qualities and in so doing bring out the best in each other; thus each both supplements and complements and helps to make the other.

Anger undergoes marked changes in the teens, its expressions becoming differentiated between boys and girls. Pugnacity is in part least a secondary sexual trait. With animals the season of love is also the season of war. Most mammals are desperate fighters for the females and often develop weapons of offence and defence in the spring. Beards, fat, etc., are protective. As man's anthropoid progenitor became confirmed in an upright position, he fought less with tooth and jaw, used his hands to strike and developed weapons. In the adolescent the childish forms of biting, striking, scratching, making faces and the like are changed. Anger grows more inward. Expressions are more refined. Tension may be vented in physical exercise or other leading off of mind and body. In girls, there is more liability to be an effort to suppress anger, the few spasmodic



outbursts bringing on regrets which mark a change to a steadier type. Only weaklings are incapable of righteous indignation, but as with love, pity and fear, a large part of education consists in directing it against objects worthy of it. Up the evolutionary scale these psychic storms of indignation have marked a point where our progenitors ceased to flee in fear and turned upon their foe, so those who acquired the power to discharge the most volcanic reactions survived while those who lacked it perished.

Fear or anticipatory pain is probably the greatest educator in both the animal and the human world. Childish fears are among the very oldest elements of the soul and the fact that they do not fit present conditions but do fit a past environment so well, i.e., that the expressions of fear in the child who does not reason but fears by instinct are the same as those in the adult who fears because he has reasonable ground for fearing, is the basis for some of the strongest arguments of psychogenesis as shown forth in the early discussion of this subject.

Children fear strangers, but adolescents blush in their presence. The chief blushers are adolescent girls, especially in the presence of those whose sympathy and good opinion they are not well assured of. Blushing at compliments is the vasomotor survival of a state when to be admired meant danger. The effects of bashfulness are greatly heightened if the child has been neglected in early training or if observation of its acts has generally been associated with disapproval, failure, defect,



or has led to ridicule. In older as well as younger youth this diffidence in presence of others is very marked. Some country youths so dread new faces that they become solitary in their habits. Others are sleepless in advance, experiencing all manner of forebodings; others are so impressed by those who have confident manners that they are speechless in their presence. This leads on to the expressions of the emotion of love in the child, the youth and adult. These we will mention but briefly. The infantile form is seen in ages under eight. It is transparent, with no self consciousness and manifests itself in fondness for each other's society, gifts, especially edibles, in kisses and embraces. Jealousy is developed and no mutual shyness or fear between the little sweethearts. This precocity of love is of scientific value as illustrating in the individual what is an inversion of the order of development of the race, in which the somatic seems to precede. From eight to twelve comes another phase of juvenile love. There is an acute interest in one of the opposite sex, but it is no longer unconscious. The object of attraction is followed at a distance. There is confusion in each other's presence. The boy's chief expression is by showing off. He instinctively seeks to charm by performing impossible feats and will even sometimes court actual danger. His courtship and its tension vents are those of the savage writ small. The girl responds to these expressions by perhaps ignoring them or perhaps being nice to another boy to goad him on, but if he shows signs of diversion to another, she comes forward with some unusual token. Thus boyville and girlhood react in pantomime a



love life that was old when history began and perhaps these crude rehearsals are more essential and true to life than many of the more highly elaborated expressions of it that modern convention has superposed.

The third stage is the stage of the youth's infatuation for some one much older than himself, and is illy understood. The older party may be almost revered and often much good may result to the younger in the experience.

The fourth stage beginning with puberty is a period when there is a tendency of a drawing apart of the sexes. There is an impulsion to develop and perfect an impersonation all one's own in each sex. Perhaps the ancient practice of isolating the sexes for a time from each other is appearing here as an instinct which reinforces the necessity of a period of restraint. The fifth stage is the age of love in its proper sense.

And so we might go on indefinitely concerning these and other emotional reactions and still there are many expressions which psychologists as yet have found no explanation for at all, while others as we have seen are only conjectural and often seem almost beyond belief. Among some of the yet unexplained emotional reactions are dryness of the mouth in fear, the lump in the throat in grief, the gap of expectancy, and the like, and so as we have seen while there is much room for further research much probably has been lost to us forever in extinct types of the animal world and thus we can never have an entirely comprehensive knowledge of this vast subject.

However in the study of the subject, have we not



discovered one vital meaning, that is, that by proper development and striving toward an ideal we may acquire emotional experience and its appropriate expression as we would acquire the mastery of a fine art? -having mastered it then we may control and express an emotion as occasion demands, reason, the great factor which makes man more than an animal, playing the important part here as elsewhere. Such a person will find it possible on all fitting occasions to bring himself up to that warm glow of emotionalism which is so satisfying to those in his company and as well on these or other occasions to control those emotions which tend to make him unlovable and unenjoyable.