

THE CONTINUUM OF EMOTIONS

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DEFINITION

All definitions are arbitrary and artificial since they are designed to carve out and distinguish some part within the whole, which as an infinite unity defies all attempts at division. As such, definitions can be analytically or heuristically useful, but they should never be proposed or regarded as capturing reality “as it is.” With this important caveat, I will offer what I hope is a useful distinction between feeling and emotion as a way to begin the discussion of how emotions are related to the Material – Spiritual Perspective Continuum.

As I am approaching the subject, emotion is the positive or negative charge that is associated with mental awareness of an action, thought, or statement. Sensations differ from emotions in that sensations are the result of direct perception [smell, taste, touch, hear, see] rather than the mental conceptions that these sensations may evoke. Feelings [pain, pleasure] are the direct result of the mental registry of physical sensation [conscious or unconscious], without the need for additional mental conceptualization. Emotions can be associated with sensations or feelings when sensations or feelings are further processed by human mental abilities [intellectual and/or intuitive capabilities]. In short, emotions generally are associated with a greater degree of mental processing than sensations or feelings, though in the vernacular the terms “feelings” and “emotions” tend to be used interchangeably. In a sense, emotions are feelings given contextualization, or greater attention by further mental processing. So, pain and stress are negative feelings [or responses to stimulation] with minimal mental processing. Pain or stress can evoke emotions of fear or anger depending on how pain or stress are conceptualized or understood, but pain and stress alone are not emotions. Likewise, pleasure is a positive feeling [or response to stimulation] and it can evolve to the emotions of joy or love depending on how the feeling of pleasure is contextualized or understood, but pleasure itself is not an emotion.

THE BIO-CHEMICAL BASIS OF EMOTION

The time may come when we will know the full physiological/bio-chemical basis for sensations, feelings, and emotions. At that point we may be able to characterize the particular hormones and receptors whose activity is associated with these phenomena. What we know already strongly suggests that the distinction between mind and body that we tend to make is of limited reality and that what is actually occurring is a complex system or network of continuous communication [stimulation and inhibition] to and fro and interconnected across all levels throughout the body and mind as one. Even allowing for this understanding, it seems likely that what I am calling emotions will be characterized by more complex communication input and output from the conceptual centers of the brain than will be the case for what I am referring to as sensation and feeling.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT AND OF INTENSITY IN THE CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION OF EMOTIONS

We distinguish and assign names to emotions according to their intensity and the contexts to which they apply. The number of such distinctions varies across cultures with languages making finer or coarser discriminations. Contextualization can take several forms, usually in association with physical or social surroundings or situations. Contextualization can be very rapid. For example, pain can move to startle, fright, fear, or terror depending on the intensity of the pain and the level of perceived threat in the surrounding situation. If the pain and situation are intense and threatening enough, the likely active response will be rapid withdrawal or flight. A different emotional evolution starting from pain can occur if the situation has a reduced threat level. In this case, depending on the intensity of the pain, it may move to frustration, resentment, anger, or rage. If the pain is intense enough in this context, the likely active response will be fight or attack. The main underlying difference in these two emotional and response sequences, which come from the same initial feeling, is the level of perceived threat or danger associated with the pain situation. The greater the sense of threat, the more likely is the flight rather than the fight response. And the greater the intensity of the pain, the more intense the emotion is likely to be, whether in the direction leading to fight or flight. So, while at the cultural level through language we distinguish a great many emotions by name, there are most likely only a few truly different emotions at the bio-chemical level. They just differ by intensity and the responses they evoke.

Because emotions are conceptualized and contextualized responses, emotions can be evoked secondarily by their associated learned contexts, quite apart from having to emanate from a primary feeling. A certain situation [a dark basement] or a specific smell [the odor of hydrogen sulfide – rotten eggs] can be so strongly tied in memory to a fearful experience or set of fearful experiences that fear can be evoked directly by these associated contextual variables. Application of memory to perception is part of the conceptual process which can by-pass direct sensation or feeling and evoke emotion directly.

MULTIPLE AND MIXED EMOTIONS

A particular memory usually involves a complex of concepts [words and images] and often has more than one charge that is associated with it. When these charges are different in value [+ and -], the memory can evoke multiple or mixed emotions. The context of the concept can reduce the multiple emotions to one value or the other [a lion is attractive for its strength and power when viewed in a scene at a safe distance, but it may be feared when viewed as a threat close up in a scene]. Or a concept can produce mixed emotions [the father is loved as a provider but feared as a punisher]. Some emotions are mixed in themselves, like jealousy and envy. These emotions refer to something or someone desired or attractive that is possessed by someone else or blocked from possession by someone/something else and so combines desire with dislike, or more intensely, love with hate. Again, the emotion itself is the level of intensity of the positive or negative charge itself, while the word describing the emotion [love, fear, elation, despair] designates intensity and a particular context, condition or situation. So, a very negative charge applied to the way one person regards another in a particular social situation is hatred. Add a strong sense of threat as coming from the hated party and hatred is transformed into dread. Change the conditions and you may well change the cultural designation of the particular emotion differentiated, even though at the bio-chemical level the underlying emotion may be identical.

BIOLOGICALLY AND SOCIALLY BASED EMOTIONS

Among the larger list of emotions that we do distinguish at the level of culture, a few seem more or less universal and are probably associated with biological survival [e.g. anger, fear, desire, excitement, passion, joy]. Other emotions are associated with more or less universal conditions in social relations and their management [depression, envy, grief, regret, embarrassment, lust, pride]. It seems likely that the emotions associated with biological survival are primary while the socially connected emotions are later and secondary. Of course, primary and secondary distinctions in evolution does not mean later, secondary emotions are less important. Indeed, as culture becomes ever more significant in defining human behavior, emotions that are distinguished at a later time in evolution may ascend to prominence [e.g. depression].

INTRODUCTION TO THE DIAGRAM OF THE EMOTIONS CONTINUUM

In the following diagram the culturally distinguished emotions of western culture are arrayed on a positive to negative horizontal axis by intensity with neutral being in the center and the greatest positive charge to the right and the greatest negative charge to the left. Culturally designated emotions of equal intensity are arranged in what amount to more or less vertical columns along the continuum. Many terms we use to describe emotions are very similar and connotation can be subtle and differ among individuals. As a result, we could probably debate endlessly the particular placement of a term in a specific emotional array. It is much more important to recognize the negative to positive trend in the designations along the continuum for each type of emotion than to agree on the exact placement or association of each term with a specific emotional type. We must always keep in mind that it is culture and society, not biology that is responsible for the great variety of terms we use to describe emotions.

The reader will find that the terms describing emotions in the chart mix nouns, verbs and adjectives. I wish this were not the case and that all references could be of one type, but unfortunately our lexicon often does not offer each distinguishing term in all forms, especially when we get to the point of rather fine distinctions. So, allow for this source of some frustration and try to focus on the trend that each word sequence reveals.

CONTINUUM OF EMOTIONS CHART

Associated Charge

Negative

--

Neutral

--

Positive

Associated General Attitude

Pessimism

--

Optimism

Associated General Emotional State

Unhappiness -- Distraught -- Distress -- Disappointment -- Comfort/Acceptance -- Satisfaction -- Happiness

Emotional Arrays

Dread [Escape] -- Anxiety/Worry/Apprehension -- Concern -- Anticipation -- Excitement/Enthusiasm -- Ecstasy

Terror [Flight] -- Fear -- Fright - Shock - Scare -- Startle -- Surprise -- Enjoy -- Attraction/Infatuation -- Devotion

Hate/Abhor/Loathe [Attack] - Contempt - Resent -- Dislike -- Pity -- Empathy -- Like/Desire/Affection -- Passion -- Love

Rage [Fight] -- Ire/Anger -- Indignation/Displeasure/Frustration -- Ease -- Attraction -- Joy -- Euphoria

Despair/Depression -- Sadness -- Contentment -- Gladness/Fulfillment -- Hope -- Elation

Grief -- Loneliness -- Dissolution/Loss -- Companionship -- Camaraderie/Brotherhood -- Unity

Remorse -- Sorrow -- Guilt/Shame -- Regret -- Embarrassment -- Accomplishment/Success/Win -- Pride

Envy/Covet/Jealousy/Crave/Lust [Desire/Attraction – blocked or inappropriate or taken to extreme where it becomes negative]

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE EMOTIONAL CONTINUUM TO THE MATERIAL – SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE CONTINUUM

What is most interesting in the above chart of emotions is to explore the manner in which this negative to positive array of western cultural emotions corresponds to the primary characteristics of the Material – Spiritual Perspective Continuum, which we have considered in some depth in Part Two of this essay. For this discussion, the reader may want to bring the Material – Spiritual Perspective Continuum Chart [pp. 28-29] together with the above Emotional Continuum Chart.

When we explore a possible overlap of these two continua, it is noteworthy that the extremely negative emotions from the emotional continuum are associated with the material end of the material – spiritual perspective continuum. By contrast, the most positive emotions are associated with the spiritual end of this perspective continuum. There is some basis for this correlation, though there is the need for qualification, which we will consider shortly. The material end of the perspective continuum has as its primary characteristic that reality is seen in terms of entities that are understood as separate, independently motivated, and in a competitive relationship to one another. Intellect, and any technological or strategic advantage it can provide, is a means for one entity to out compete/survive others and thereby have the opportunity to perpetuate its genes. This world of extreme separation and competition is often a lonely world that is fundamentally dangerous and potentially threatening. It is understandable that such a world can easily contain the emotions that are associated with flight and attack and the results of loss that often accompany competitive actions: distress, anger, fear, rage, hate, grief, fright, despair, etc.

Depression or Despair is the emotional condition associated with the discovery of oneself as totally separated – as being entirely alone or isolated – lost. By contrast, the most positive emotions of Elation and Ecstasy are associated with the sense of oneself as totally fulfilled, the experience of self as infinitely connected to all else, as undifferentiated. Fear and Dread almost always occur in experiences of separation when reality is viewed and engaged toward the material end of the perspective continuum. On the other hand, Joy and Love almost always occur in experiences of intense connection when reality is viewed and engaged toward the spiritual end of the perspective continuum. Most importantly, it is nearly impossible to charge the experience of intense connection at the spiritual end of the perspective continuum with the negative emotions of separation. The exception here would seem to be the experience of the Void, or the total loss of self, which confounds experience at the spiritual end of the continuum. This apparent exception disappears when we realize that what is really happening in the experience of the Void is that the material perspective is intruding into the spiritual experience of Ecstasy and by re-introducing the relevance of the separate self into the picture, transforms joy into fear/terror.

It is at this point that we run into a very significant challenge in looking at the overlap of the emotional and perspective continua. We cannot offer the corollary to the above statement. It is not the case that it is nearly impossible to charge the experiences at the material end of the perspective continuum with the positive emotions associated with connection. In fact experience at the material

end of the reality continuum can be associated with either negative or positive emotional responses and to about the same degree. So, while negative emotions are virtually exclusive to the experience of reality toward the material end of the reality perspective continuum, many positive emotions can arise as readily at the material end of the perspective continuum as at the spiritual end of this continuum. What explanation can we offer for this very significant difference, this anomaly in the overlap of the emotional and material – spiritual perspective continua?

We have already indicated that emotions are context sensitive. When we are considering experience understood from the material end of the perspective continuum, point of view arises as a significant factor in understanding the positive and negative options for emotional response. At the material end of the continuum, the same basic stimulus – a man crossing the street at a traffic light with several other people moving in the direction of the observer – can produce opposite emotions [terror and flight, or excitement and attraction] depending on the point of view of the observer. If the observer views the man as a lover moving in her direction, the event evokes emotions of excitement and attraction and the inclination to move toward the man. If the observer views the man as a recognized violent mugger, the event evokes fear or terror and the inclination to flee from the man. If we alter the context slightly and the man is a lover, and he is jay walking by himself and is about to be struck by a vehicle that he did not see, the observer is likely to experience emotions of surprise, fear and dread, rather than excitement and attraction. Context and point of view define emotional response toward the material end of the perspective continuum where entities are understood as separate and independently motivated.

As our perspective shifts in the spiritual direction, separation and independent motivation weaken and finally dissolve, entities connect and then merge into one, and existing within the eternal flow replaces time, space and causality. In the condition of unification at the far end of the spiritual perspective continuum, the basis for negative emotion disappears – entities are not separate or independently motivated, or subject to definition by point of view or contextual variables. Moreover, as we move toward the social center and away from the spiritual extreme perspective position, connection remains significant and the positive emotions continue to dominate until we reach the center itself where positive and negative emotional options are equal. Another way to state this situation is: the greater the dominance of the intellectual/analytical faculty of mind, the greater is the option for the more intense, negative emotions to arise. With the emergence of a greater and greater sense of separation, point of view enters the picture to define our attitude toward events, and it is possible for the same event – the death of a cat – to be regarded as a tragedy with grief as the emotional response [for the owner who adores the cat as a pet] or as a cause for celebration with joy as the emotional response [for the neighbor whose wild song birds are decimated by the cat as a despised predator].

The pursuit of intellect, reason and science, which is associated in the overlap with the material perspective, can lead to successful results and a kind of high or ecstasy of accomplishment or fulfillment. These are very positive emotions arising in experience defined by the material perspective. Clearly the pursuit of intellect and analysis are not necessarily linked to negative emotions. Moreover, the discovery high for the scientist can be compounded by the social benefits of the scientific results, which may bring celebration and elevation of the scientist by the surrounding human community – a kind of double positive emotional effect.

Competitive behavior arising from the material perspective displays the same extreme emotional response options. Highly competitive – even warring – behavior can lead to emotions of joy for the winner, and even connectedness, if the surrounding community identifies with the winner and pronounces its acclaim. It all depends on point of view, which is available to define our emotional response at the material end of the perspective continuum. What may be viewed very negatively from one perspective at one scale [the death in battle of a fellow tribesman and leader] may be regarded extremely positively when seen from the perspective of the opposing tribe [conquering the foe and promoting the benefit of one's own tribe] or at a different scale [elimination of a tribal leader who was the source of intertribal conflict at the regional level]. The emotional effects of takings behaviors, which are associated with the material perspective and inherent to predatory species like humans, can be converted from association with negative to positive emotions depending on shifts in point of view and or scale. At the level of the loser and his point of view, the emotions associated with the results of competitive/aggressive behavior are generally negative [grief, resentment, hatred]. On the other hand, the winner is elated from his viewpoint. It can be very difficult to determine objectively which point of view with its associated emotions is “correct” or “justified.” While debates can rage in this battle of viewpoints, it is worth remembering that from a spiritual perspective, neither individual point of view is justified since there can be no winners and losers to begin with. From this perspective, winners and losers are fundamentally connected and share an identity; what happens to one happens to both.

So, it is generally true that as the sense of discreteness or separation increases, the likelihood for and intensity of a negative emotional response increases. And it is equally accurate to say that as the sense of connection and relations increase, emotions become more and more exclusively positive. But it is also the case that context and point of view enter the scene as we move in the direction of separation [at the material end of the perspective continuum] and that these influential variables create the option for either positive or negative emotions of equal intensity to arise.

CONCLUSION: EMOTIONS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF DYNAMIC HUMANISM

From the point of view of Dynamic Humanism, it becomes our challenge to recognize the critical importance of context and point of view in defining our emotional responses when we are operating in zones of the perspective continuum where the intellectual/analytical mode has significant input. And in this situation, it is our responsibility to be sure that our emotional responses are truly appropriate when we check them against alternative points of view [or shifts in scale]. Unchecked emotional responses can lead us individually or socially in unproductive, even entirely false, directions. Dynamic Humanism promotes the need for balance – both between the development of our mental faculties that are associated with the material [intellectual] and spiritual [intuitive] perspectives and within the material perspective itself when it comes to determining appropriate and justifiable emotional responses.

EPILOGUE, “And Now for the Rest of the Story”

Since finishing Dynamic Humanism, I have completed reports on the research that was formative in bringing me to the conclusions that I reach in this overview work. 2010 is the watershed year in seeing these reports come to fruition in three works: A Little Bit of Heaven Here (2010), the study of the intuitive basis of the deliverance faith of an urban Black church community; The I Within Me (2010), an assessment of the life history and intuitive development of a psychic healer; and Right On: Selected Short Writings of Thomas A. Burns (2010), a collection primarily of essays written since 2000 on various topics of American cultural interest, most of which reflect the dynamic humanism point of view. All four of these works produced since 2007 are available for free electronic download from my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com