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# **The Emotional Self: Embodiment, Reflexivity, and Emotion Regulation.**

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## **Abstract**

Current dominant trends in the biological and psychological sciences tend to put emphasis on the role of the brain, cognition and consciousness in realising emotional states and attempting to regulate them. In this article I suggest an alternative approach with the idea that emotions emerge within social relations and give meaning and value to the situations in which we are located. Humans are understood as embodied emotional selves for who thought and emotion are intertwined. However, individuals can get caught in obsessive and compulsive thinking and feeling traps where the self loses touch with its emotions, and because of this also loses contact with the social situation and the ability to skilfully navigate it. In such circumstances the self gets overwhelmed by emotion and loses its poise in the social setting. I consider Buddhist meditation as a technique through which people can develop a more reflexive emotional self, where reflexivity is not about control of emotion but owning one's feelings and being able to respond more sensitively and skilfully in various situations.

## **Introduction**

What is an emotion? Superficially this would seem to be an easy question to answer because everyone constantly experiences emotion in the course of everyday life. In the sciences, however, things are not so simple. The span of different theories and approaches to the emotions ranges from those neuroscientists who claim that emotions are brain functions that have evolved for their survival value (LeDoux, 1999), to sociologists and anthropologists who argue that emotions are social, cultural, and linguistic phenomena that vary over historical time and social location (Barbalet, 1998; Denzin, 1984; Lutz, 1988). As Stenner (2015) points out, the study of emotion in the Western sciences has been deeply affected by the philosophical settlement of the eighteenth century in which the mind was divided into three parts: first, cognition, which is associated with knowledge, thought, and intelligence; second, affectation, which is to do with feelings, passions, and emotions; and third, conation, associated with will, desire, and motivation to action. This was further complicated by the Enlightenment notion of the emotions as bodily and bestial, in contrast to rational thinking that was associated with the 'mind' and, thus, the realm of the human (Averill, 1996). A higher value was placed on rationality as this was thought to produce ordered and deliberate action whereas the emotions were the subjective source of irrationality and disorder, connected to the animal and the body. These ideological assumptions are deeply rooted in Western culture, to the extent that even though modern neuroscience is challenging the division between mind and body, cognition and emotion (Damasio, 1995), approaches in

psychology influenced by this trend still focus on the need for emotion regulation (Gross, 1998, 2014).

My own approach explores the idea that emotions are both a bodily and cognitive phenomenon, while also attempting to put them back into a social context (Burkitt, 2014). This work is therefore located with the sociology of emotion but of a particular type, in that I have sought to develop the relational approach to emotions. That is, to claim that emotions are not discrete entities or 'things', for they refer to patterns of relationship we are located within that provide the context in which our feelings and emotions make sense (Bateson, 1973). As Gergen (1994) has illustrated with reference to domestic violence, the anger and hostility that existed between couples in his study were not felt by either of the parties before specific conflicts, but instead emerged through repetitive patterns of relationship whenever there was a dispute. What I want to do in this article is to develop the relational approach to emotion through both pragmatist and phenomenological theories to show how emotions are not 'things' or measurable entities located only in the body or brain, but are experiences that emerge out of specific contexts in which we are related to other people and things in a meaningful way. Although emotions are associated with certain bodily feelings and with our reflexive consciousness of them as experiences we can verbalise and reflect on, these would not make sense without the specific relational context in which they have emerged. In terms of emotion regulation I will argue here that thoughts and feelings that get out of control are an issue for human selves, but it is often the attempt to control emotion that is the problem in the first place. Problems start to occur when the thinking and

feeling self loses touch with its emotions and they gain autonomy and control of our actions. First, though, I want to begin by outlining my ideas about emotion and its relational and embodied nature.

### **The relational and embodied emotional self**

In my approach, then, feelings and emotions are to do with our relationships to other people and things within our lives, and to the various situations in which we are constantly located. In this sense they are indices that refer us to elements of situations and tell us something about their relevance and how they affect us. Thus, emotions always carry implicit or explicit meaning and value that is both social and personal. Emotions orient us in the world in which we act. This is connected to William James's (1971) idea that the body acts as a sounding board in response to its various experiences, with feelings and emotions as its reverberations. There are few, if any, experiences and activities in life that are not accompanied by feelings and emotions, including the 'coarser' emotions such as fear, anger, and joy, or the more 'subtle' feelings like those of agreement and disagreement, pleasure and displeasure, as we read a book or an article. Feelings and emotions, then, not only make our lives meaningful by expressing the living engagement we have to the various situations we exist within, they are also acts of discernment that express our tastes and, as such, are markers of the things we like and dislike, love and hate. For James, this meant that emotions have to be understood in an aesthetic way, as acts through which we both understand our lives and make them meaningful.

James's fellow pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey (1958, 1971), continued this trend of thought, seeing emotions as aesthetic acts, but understood that meaning comes before our experiences and structures them, because we act in a social world. He also fully realised that feelings and emotions are not only about discrimination, but more generally are acts of valuation. In feeling emotions such as love and hate, envy and jealousy, joy and repulsion, we are expressing the value of the thing (person, object, or situation) to which we are related and, thus, something of the quality of our relationship to it. In what has become a standard model in psychology, such valuations are characterized as 'appraisal' and seen as a cognitive – primarily mental – event in which people process information from the environment, assessing its relevance in terms of their own concerns and preparing us for action (Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986). For Dewey, though, feelings and emotions are not purely cognitive or psychological properties that we express in action, because they are the action itself; this means they are never solely bodily or mental phenomena, but always a combination of both. It also means that valuation is not first and foremost a cognitive process. As Brian Parkinson (2007) has pointed out, emotion can emerge from a person's bodily *orientation* to a situation and from direct adjustments to relational dynamics going on within it: for example, the appearance of a gunman in a bank would be directly perceived as scary without us having to think about it first.

As such, the aesthetic approach to emotion of James and Dewey attempts to unite body and mind, thought and feeling, as one irreducible whole that only ever appears in meaningful social action. From an individual, biographical point of view, the acts of valuing certain people or things form *dispositions* that are

central to the identity of the person, creating tendencies to act or respond in particular ways in given social situations. An emotional disposition is an adjustment of formed habits from the past to the situation in which we must orient ourselves in any given present moment. We all recognise such emotional dispositions in ourselves and the people we know as a tendency – that is never totally predictable or inevitable – to respond emotionally in particular ways to certain situations, and how this forms part of their character or personality. We understand our own dispositions (sometimes in a limited way) and those of others as a tendency to be bad tempered or good-natured, generous or mean, open or defensive, and so on, this being the basis of the emotional self.

However, because humans are a social species that live in a cultural and linguistic world, this has already been meaningfully, actively structured as an articulable field in which we can express our feelings, before we enter it as individuals in infancy. Very young, pre-linguistic infants first encounter structured social activity as non-verbal meaning in relation to caregivers, who communicate through touch, gestures (such as smiling), and sound (like cooing or other communicative noises that are intended to sooth or stimulate infants). It is through the structures of non-verbal communication and the routines of everyday life that pre-linguistic children gradually begin to learn the meaning of words and to express themselves in language, thereby being inducted into the discursive social world. However, the fact that the world is already meaningfully structured by our own particular culture before we enter it as individuals does not imply that feelings are always transparent to us and that we can immediately articulate what we feel. This would account for those occasions when we

struggle to understand a situation and clarify our feelings with respect to it. Rather, it means that the world we are located in is already structured for articulation, even if expressing certain things in an intelligible linguistic form is a struggle. As Heidegger points out, when expressing something for the first time 'this is possible only in that it lies before us as something expressible' (1962, p. 190). Furthermore, we learn language in a practical and bodily way as speech, which is 'a certain use of my phonatory apparatus and a certain modulation of my body as being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 425), and thus speech shapes and moulds the very nature of feeling and emotion itself, the way in which it is pre-formed for expression. Feeling and emotion, then, are not things that exist in a pre-linguistic field and have to be expressed in language: they are already within the field of linguistic articulation but need interpretation and expression.

Our feelings, then, orient us in the world, to objects and to others, but need articulating: what am I feeling, what is the feeling about, what is it telling me about my relation to a particular person, thing, or situation? In doing this, we are articulating not just a self-contained feeling inside our bodies, but are also interpreting what it is telling us about our relation to the world we are in and how it is orienting us within it. Fully articulating a feeling or emotion means locating our self in the world and articulating (or not, as the case may be) that orientation to objects, to others, and to ends or goals. This means, though, that for pragmatist and phenomenological thinkers, like those I have been referring to here, intentional and emotional action emerges prior to conscious reflection on the world or upon our actions within it (Gier, 1976). If and when we become



conscious of our actions and emotions, we do so when are already directed towards objects or others within our world.

Thus, it is within relations and communicative interactions with others to whom we are directed that the emotional self is formed. This is true of the pre-linguistic child but is also true of the child as it learns language, and it remains so throughout our lives. The pragmatist thinkers have shown us that emotional responses are evaluations, but these are something we learn in communication with others (Cooley, 1983; Dewey, 1958; Mead, 1934). Whenever we act in the social world, others communicate their attitudes towards us; they say – in words or in looks and gestures – something about their evaluation of us or of our actions. Have we undertaken a task well or badly, have we acted in a moral or an immoral way? From the words, vocal intonations, and gestures of others we also intuit what they are thinking about us, how they may feel about us, and this in turn makes us feel something about our self. Are people responding to me in a good or a bad way, what is this telling me about my self or my actions? This may confirm dispositions and a self-image we have already developed – ‘I’m seen as a bad person, I am bad, I’ll show them how bad I can be’ – or it may run counter to how we see ourselves and want to be seen – ‘they think I’ve done something wrong, but I’m a good person, I need to make amends.’ Nevertheless, it is in this way that consciousness of self and the creation of self-image emerges out of the fabric of our social interactions.

In addition to this, we also constantly experience evaluations of certain feelings and emotions, meaning that we have feelings about our feelings and what that means for us as a self. We feel a certain way about particular emotions, such as

fear of being afraid or of confronting difficult feelings in self and others, like bereavement. This includes the fear and apprehension we feel about unpleasant things and feelings, which are pushed away or denied. Such instances occur not so much in accordance with 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983) as according norms that are communicated through interpersonal interactions, which are variable across time and place according to local cultures. For individuals, such interactions can create ambivalent feelings, feelings about feelings, that they are afraid or ashamed of having. This leads to some of the feelings being pushed away or hidden but they can then become overwhelming. In this way, emotion regulation occurs not just in instances where people apply feeling rules or normative demands to their emotions, but in interpersonal situations where ambivalent feelings occur because there are contradictory emotional demands placed upon the person (Burkitt, 2017).

Later in life the judgements we make about ourselves, and about what we feel, are not always made from the standpoint of particular others, but from that of an impersonal position on our self and others. These are the moral or ideological positions we have adopted that reflect the values of groups with whom we identify, whether these are religious, political, or ethical views. It is through these positions that we judge and value our selves, our actions, feelings and emotions. This leads to what some have called 'second order emotion' (Archer, 2000) or the appraisal of emotion itself (Gross, 2014), something that for Gross leads to emotional regulation. So for example, sexual desire for another person may be exciting and delirious if we are free and single, but dangerous and unwanted if we are already committed to someone and we value monogamy and

loyalty. For Gross, this would be one of the occasions for emotion regulation as we downplay our attraction to someone else and play up our attraction and commitment to our partner. However, for him, this is a cognitive act that is purely psychological. And for Archer the process of ordering our concerns, through which second order emotions arise in accordance with the hierarchy of our values, happens through an internal conversation that is understood as primarily a first-person process. In both of these positions, our relation to others and our identification with them is downplayed, in terms of the very creation of our acts of valuation in the first place. What I am saying here is that we evaluate our actions not solely through psychological, cognitive acts of appraisal and reappraisal, or through an internal conversation held only with our own self: instead, we take positions from many other stances, both personal and impersonal, as we reflect on our feelings and emotions. In this way, the internal conversation is of vital importance as we reflect on our feelings and emotions, valuing and judging them as we do so: but this inner dialogue takes place with more voices than that of our own self, both in communicative interactions with others and in the internal conversation, creating an order of concerns that has not been completely self-erected.

The key point here, though, is that although feelings and emotions are themselves evaluations that develop through interactions with others and can become embodied as dispositions, we also make evaluations about our feeling and emotions that become second order feelings. This is done through reflexivity, which is any process that turns back on itself and becomes aware of itself: this can occur through conscious, cognitive reflection on an emotion, as

Gross suggested above, or as Archer noted through the internal conversation, as we evaluate emotions according to our values. In the next section I want to examine how this can, at times, lead to individuals losing touch with many feelings whose function it is to put us in contact with others and the world around us. The focus should not be upon the control or regulation of emotion, as Gross suggests, because this in itself can become a problem. Instead we should focus on how the self can be more present with its own feelings and deal with them in a more honest and open way.

### **Being there: the emotional and reflexive self**

The key point I have been making so far is that feelings and emotions arise in relation to our world and, more particularly, to the people and things within it, and as such they tell us something about the nature and quality of our relationships. More specifically, emotions are themselves patterns of relationship, processes of embodied evaluation that tell us what or whom is of importance to us in the various situations that compose our lives. Along with the feelings we become aware of in social and communicative interactions, we also become aware of evaluations of emotion – that, for example, it is wrong in certain circumstances to feel angry, jealous, envious, or afraid. Attempting to block these emotions, to deny them or push them away, or to become fearful of them can lead to more problems than the emotions themselves. For example, panic attacks can be reactions to situations where we fear the rise of fear itself, a response that makes us lose control over our own self and our situation. Fear of

examinations illustrates this well, as it is not just the examination we fear but also the way we have responded to this situation in the past and how it has overwhelmed us. Buytendijk (1974) argues that when a situation overwhelms the self we lose our poise, which is to say we lose the sense of skilful command and control of it. Another example is embarrassment, where we feel as though we lose ease and grace in a social situation and form a heightened awareness of our awkward and distressed self, believing that all others who are present have seen this and are looking at us. The effects of this, such as blushing and clumsiness, can become greater objects of fear than the social situations that bring them on. To be poised, then, is to be self-possessed in that we remain in touch with our self, our feelings, and our circumstances, maintaining a degree of control over them. To lose poise is to lose this self-possession, along with one's contact with the situation and sense of control over it, and to feel thrown off balance.

This is something noted by Heidegger (1962), who says that in fear we forget ourselves so that the situation we fear, when it is encountered, overwhelms us. It is like we are flooded or engulfed by fear to such an extent that the self is carried away and all we are left with is the fear itself. Heidegger contrasts this with anxiety, which is a kind of objectless fear; because of this, we lose touch with the world around us, which comes to feel as though it is alien and meaningless. In this state, the sense of self is heightened to the point where it feels unreal and without foundation in the world. In both cases, though, it is the place of the self in these experiences that is central, along with the contact between the self and its world, the core of which are feelings and emotions.

If this is the case, however, it means that dealing with our emotions and thoughts more effectively involves not simply better control or regulation of emotion, but instead developing a self that can be more in touch with its emotions and also, through them, with the situations that compose its life experience. An interesting case in point here is Michal Pagis's studies of Buddhist (Vipassana) meditation and the emotional self. For Pagis (2009, 2012) the emotional self arises in a very similar way to how I have described it here, through embodied social interactions. Indeed, meditation itself is seen as a social practice, as this becomes a more intense experience when it takes place in a social space with others, even though there is no direct interaction involved. When people meditate, what they become aware of is their own embodied reflexivity about their feelings and emotions, some of which may not have been acknowledged before. In the Vipassana technique, the meditators are encouraged to concentrate fully on whatever it is they are feeling without trying to avoid any uneasiness or discomfort that the feelings and emotions may bring. Instead, they are asked to focus on all the varied qualities of the feeling no matter how distressing or unpleasant they may be. They also are asked to do this without trying to interpret these feelings in terms of looking for a cause for them. This is done not just to put the meditator in contact with their own emotional self, but so that meditators 'start feeling themselves feeling the world' (Pagis, 2012, p. 105).

In this embodied self-reflexivity, Pagis argues, the meditators are encouraged to accept their feelings and not fight them or fear them, and that through this process people achieve a greater detachment from their emotions by simply observing them. At the same time they become more fully aware of feelings

because they are not pushing them away, suppressing or denying them. Although I agree with this, I would also want to add here that the interesting thing about this form of reflexivity, achieved through meditation, is that it is a form of reflection on feelings and emotions achieved without further judgement and second order emotions. It encourages people into 'being there' with their feelings and being open to what they are telling them about certain situations in their lives. Being open to feeling means that the self can then be there with its feelings, own them and respond to situations, rather than being overwhelmed by emotions. We are present with them, are one with them, and so can respond more openly to others about the way we feel, while also retaining our sense of self and poise in the situation. This is achieved by establishing a reflexive position within the self that is observational and non-judgemental. That does not mean that the self then ignores all social norms and rules and simply becomes the expression of whatever it is feeling. Rather, it means that the self is more present in order to make those decisions about what is right or wrong to say and do in certain situations, being more in touch with both itself and the social context, including its relational commitments to others. As one of Pagis's respondents in her research said, 'When a storm comes you do not let it overwhelm you' (2009, p. 272).

However, one area where I disagree with Pagis is in her view that reflexivity is mainly based on the internal conversation, which is discursively rather than bodily based. According to her, what happens in meditation is that the internal conversation is switched off and instead people achieve an embodied reflexivity based on an increased awareness of their sensations and feelings. Although I

agree with this up to a point, I hope to have shown earlier in this article that feeling and speech are intertwined from the very beginning, so that feelings are linked to language and open to articulation. Because of this it is not possible to achieve a purely embodied reflexivity in which one can monitor sensation and feeling without naming them or discursively interpreting them. This is because speech is learned as a bodily activity and we also learn early in childhood that bodily feelings and sensations have a verbal expression. This is not simply to cloak them in verbal labels, but instead feelings and sensations are actually shaped and formed by linguistic expression. Thought and feeling are, from that point onwards, always interconnected. The upshot of this is that just as we can get caught up in obsessive or repetitive internal conversations that we wish we could switch off, so too can we get caught up in 'feeling traps' (Cromby, 2015), such as paranoia, that can come to dominate our lives. Indeed, thought and feeling is intimately linked as the foundation of human consciousness, and as such our feelings can fuel our thoughts and vice versa. So in the condition of paranoia, we think *and* feel that others are controlling our actions, can even see into our thoughts, and so manipulate and plot everything that happens to us. Because Dewey thought that humans are body-minds, perhaps we should talk about feeling-thinking traps.

It seems to me that the overall outcome of meditation practice is to achieve that kind of reflexivity on emotion where one can assume the standpoint of an observer, a form of 'generalised other' that G. H. Mead (1934) talked of, but without that being linked to a particular social or moral standpoint with its concomitant values and judgements. It is an impersonal stance in the fullest



sense of that term. This is different from emotion regulation with its focus on the *cognitive* appraisal and reappraisal of situations, ignoring the bodily self and its embedding in a social world. It also contrasts to certain approaches in psychoanalysis, such as that of Fonagy et al. (2002), who help those in analysis to reach a 'mentalized affectivity', which is a mature, self-reflective, agential state where they can experientially recognise, understand, and regulate emotion. Although the end state is very similar to what I am outlining here, once again the emphasis is placed on the cognitive through the attempt of Fonagy et al. to align psychoanalysis with information-processing models of consciousness and with the need for emotion to be regulated by cognition.

What the Buddhist practice of meditation shows us is the essential link between the body and the mind, cognition and emotion, because the techniques it uses to calm and relax the body – usually sitting still and quiet for a period of time focusing on an internal sensation like breathing or feeling, or on an external object – also calms and concentrates the mind. And once a more focused and concentrated state of thinking is achieved that also helps to maintain a calmer and more centred sense of bodily self, present in the current situation and in touch with its feelings and circumstances. As the respondent in Pagis's study said, we can then feel ourselves feeling the world. Although many Buddhist thinkers are opposed to the idea of a metaphysical self, a given and unchanging non-physical entity, they nevertheless constantly refer to a self based on 'the facts of [human] reflexivity and individuality' (Collins, 1982, p. 73). But the key thing meditation techniques show is the link between bodily and mental discipline, and how this allows individuals not to be controlled by thinking and

feeling traps but to be more reflexively in touch with and in charge of their own self, including thoughts and emotions.

## **Conclusion**

To understand emotion, then, we need an appropriate theory of the embodied emotional self and the relational nature of feelings and emotions. I have explored this by developing ideas from pragmatism and phenomenology to show how feeling and emotion is always a part of embodied and intentional action, even before we are consciously aware of what we are feeling. This is because our actions and emotions are formed in a meaningful social world that pre-exists us and which is something that we come to self-reflexive consciousness within. Because feeling and emotion is such an integral part of our being in the world, connecting us in vital ways to objects, to others, and to our own self, losing touch with our feelings or blocking them out can mean that we lose our poise and sense of being in touch with the world. The example of meditation practice illustrates the vital importance of staying in touch with feeling in a non-judgemental way, so that the focus is no longer purely on the regulation of emotion, as if emotion is something dangerous and a threat to order. Individuals are able to better navigate the world when their own self is fully present within it, in touch with its own thoughts and feelings but not overwhelmed by them, responding sensitively to the demands of each unique situation rather than being caught in thinking and feeling traps. A self more present with its feelings is a self more in tune with the, sometimes contradictory, demands of the social world.

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