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The part-whole perception of emotion

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A B S T R A C T

A clever argument purports to show that we can directly perceive the emotions of others: (1) some emotional expressions are parts of the emotions they express; (2) in perceiving a part of something, one can perceive the whole; (3) therefore, in perceiving some emotional expressions, one can perceive the emotions they express. My aim in this paper is to assess the extent to which contemporary theories of emotion support the first premise of this argument.

1. Introduction

Imagine that you are driving to work. You take your eyes off the road for just a second to change the radio station, and when you look up again you see that the car in front of you has come to a sudden stop. You slam on the brakes, but it's too late. Your car skids into the back of the car in front of you, knocking it forward. A second later, the driver throws open his door, stomps over to the crumpled hood of your vehicle, and begins slamming his fist on it while shouting at you. His face is red, his veins bulge, and his eyes stare daggers at you. "Boy is he angry," you think to yourself as you shrink behind the steering wheel.

What makes you think that the man is angry? Obviously it has something to do with his behavior and the events leading up to it. But what is the cognitive process that generates this belief? Philosophers have proposed three different answers to this question:

1. According to the *Theory Theory* (TT), you judge that the man is angry because you (subconsciously) apply a folk psychological theory of emotion that predicts that people who are hit by cars and who shout, stomp, and slam their fists are angry (Carruthers, 1996).
2. According to the *Simulation Theory* (ST), you judge that the man is angry because you (subconsciously) place yourself in his shoes and judge that you would be angry if someone hit your car and you responded by shouting, stomping, and slamming your fists (Gordon, 1986).
3. According to the *Direct Social Perception Theory* (DSP), you judge that the man is angry because you can directly perceive his anger in his shouting, stomping, and fist slamming (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012).

At first blush, DSP seems utterly implausible. *Emotions are not the sorts of things that can be perceived.* Indeed, much of the motivation for adopting TT and ST derives from the commonsense assumption that emotions are hidden from the senses and so must be inferred on the basis of something else.¹ But is the falsity of DSP really so certain?

An old but clever argument purports to show that it is possible to perceive emotions directly in their expressions (Hampshire, 1976, 74–75; Tormey, 1971, 47–48; Green, 2007, 84–93; Green, 2010).² It runs as follows:

The clever argument

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¹ Carruthers (2015) argues, however, that DSP and TT are ultimately compatible. Gallagher (2015) questions this compatibility.

² To be clear, this is not the only argument that supports DSP, nor is it necessarily the most persuasive.

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1. Some emotional expressions are parts of the emotions they express.
2. In perceiving a part of something, one can perceive the whole.
3. Therefore, in perceiving some emotional expressions, one can perceive the emotions they express.

To get a sense for how this argument is supposed to work, consider an analogy. When I look next to my computer, I see my coffee mug. I don't see *all* of my coffee mug, however; I see only *part* of it. More specifically, I see the part of its outer surface that faces me. The other parts of the coffee mug are, at the moment, hidden from my senses. Yet it seems obvious that when I look next to my computer, I see my coffee mug. We could spell out the reasoning as follows:

The mundane argument

1. The mug's outer surface is a part of the coffee mug.
2. In perceiving a part of something, one can perceive the whole.
3. Therefore, in perceiving the mug's outer surface, one can perceive the coffee mug itself.

Advocates argue that the Mundane Argument is sound, and thus that the Clever Argument must be sound too, assuming that the first premise is true. Critics point out that the second premise is ambiguous, and that the reading of it that supports DSP is false (Spaulding, 2015). From the fact that I have perceived a person's smile it follows neither that I perceive the person *as happy* nor that I perceive *that the person is happy*. Perhaps I mistake the smile for a smirk, or perhaps I make nothing of the smile. Insofar as DSP is ultimately a claim about our epistemic access to the emotions of others, the Clever Argument comes up short. Advocates respond by arguing that the perception of emotions via their expressions can meet whatever further conditions are necessary for the subject to perceive a person as emotional or to perceive that the person is emotional (Newen, Welpinghus, & Juckel, 2015; Smith, 2015; Spaulding, 2015).

I won't intervene on the ongoing debates about premise 2 here. Rather, my aim is to assess premise 1. Are some expressions *really* parts of the emotions they express? Historically, philosophers have sought to defend premise 1 by appealing to theories of emotion that support it. Hampshire (1976, 74–75) cites a simple form of Behaviorism, which reduces emotions to behaviors. Tormey (1971, 47–48) adopts a Wittgensteinian form of Constructionism, which defines emotions as constellations of private mental states and public behaviors. And Green (2007, 84–93, 2010) calls upon Paul Griffith's (1998) interpretation of Basic Emotions Theory, which identifies emotions with "affect programs," or synchronized psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses to emotional stimuli. Each of these theories classifies some emotional expressions as parts of the emotions they express, and thus each of them supports the truth of the Clever Argument's first premise. The problem is that Behaviorism is now defunct, Wittgensteinian Constructionism has been supplanted by newer forms of Constructionism, and Basic Emotions Theory faces an onslaught of recent critics. How well does premise 1 of the Clever Argument hold up today?

In this paper I will survey the major theories of emotion in philosophy and psychology to determine the extent to which they support the first premise of the Clever Argument. What I find is that the theories are divided. Philosophers tend to adopt theories that identify emotions with introspectable mental states, and so tend to deny that expressions are parts of emotions. Psychologists tend to adopt theories that identify emotions with coordinated psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions, and so tend to affirm that expressions are parts of emotions. (There are exceptions on both sides.) Who's right?

In reflecting on this divide, I conclude that it is as much a disagreement over the *meanings* of emotion terms as it is a disagreement over the *nature* of emotion. Those who affirm that expressions are parts of emotions hold that emotions are natural kinds, and (implicitly) adopt an *externalist* perspective on the meanings of natural kind terms. That is, they hold that emotion terms refer directly to whatever emotions really are (namely, coordinated psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions), and deny that the meanings of these terms are fully grasped by competent speakers. Even though people consistently think of emotions as introspectable mental states, it turns out that they are mistaken. The truth is that introspectable mental states are but parts of emotions.

By contrast, those who deny that expressions are parts of emotions (implicitly) adopt an *internalist* perspective on the meanings of emotion terms. Some affirm that emotions are natural kinds; others deny this. But in any case, they hold that emotion terms mean whatever competent speakers use them to mean (namely, introspectable mental states). Often, advocates of this approach consider the identification of emotions with introspectable mental states to be *a priori*. Psychologists may have discovered that these introspectable mental states are parts of complex biological reactions, but even then the word "emotion" picks out only the mental states. We could call the complex reactions "affect programs" or something similar, but we ought to reserve the word "emotion" for the thing we ordinarily use the word to mean, namely the introspectable mental state.

These reflections help to demystify the Clever Argument. At first blush, the claim that we can directly perceive emotions in their expressions is surprising. It is natural to respond with incredulity, because we ordinarily think of emotions as introspectable mental states, which are not the sorts of the things that can be perceived. However, the claim becomes much less surprising once we recognize that the word "emotions" refers here not to introspectable mental states but to coordinated psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions. The ability to hear anger in a shout now seems no more incredible than the ability to hear digestion in a stomach gurgle. What this thesis gives up in radicality, it gains in plausibility.

The demystification of the Clever Argument has at least one important consequence for contemporary discussions of DSP: any argument for DSP that appeals to the view that expressions are parts of emotions must give up (1) the commonsense view that emotions are introspectable mental states, and (2) the philosophical view that competent speakers have an intuitive grasp of the meanings of emotion terms. The claim that expressions are parts of emotions is a boon to DSP—a number of recent arguments for DSP make use of it (e.g. Newen et al., 2015; Spaulding, 2015)—but this claim comes at a price. This price is not especially high, since the

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