Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w35f67c

Journal

ISSN
1069-7977

Author
Barile, Emilia

Publication Date
2005

Peer reviewed
Emotion and Feeling in Mind/Body Problem

Emilia Barile (emiliabarile@virgilio.it)
Department of Philosophical and Social Sciences, 47 Roma Street
Siena, 53100 ITALY

Emotions: windows on the body

The problem of emotions seems to be crucial in order to embody mind. I focus my attention on a particular feature of emotion, feeling; we lack at all a more general theory of feeling: emotion is only one of the many possible felt states and, maybe, neither the more interesting one.

Feeling puts in question above all cognitive approaches: as in Frijda & Swagerman (1987), cognitivism can’t simply ignore the problems connected to the emotion-debate, above all the role of the body. So, by a neurobiological perspective, A. Damasio’s «background feelings» are discussed here in order to rethink feeling not only as a higher order phenomenon and to show its intimate connection with the body.

Feeling

In one of his last articles C. Castelfranchi (1998) proposes a functional analysis of needs (as felt states) without begging the question of feeling as Frijda (1987) did. He shows that in order to feel we can’t lack proprioception, but, on account of the intentional structure of needs (need for...), we can’t lack mental states too, representations. Each of them, alone, is not sufficient for feeling.

On the neurobiological side, Damasio’s concept of «background feeling» (2003; 1999) goes back to the origin of the term «feelings», that is touching. By this perspective, feelings, above all background ones, are considered as part of the basic biological regulation of the organism.

Under my skin (I’ve got you...)

In some experiments by A. Damasio (1994) and his staff, patients with prefrontal damages had to react to some emotional stimuli. The neuroscientist measured their reactivity by means of skin conductance, on account of skin is the main tactile organ and, at the same time, the main viscus of our body, involved in interoception.

As a result, experimental subjects didn’t feel what they had to feel: they showed no connection with the somatic dimension of emotion. Nevertheless, amazingly, there were no differences in their knowledge: “simply” they didn’t feel what they knew they had to feel in similar situations, thanks to the cortical track given from the so called «somatic marker».

Knowing without feeling, feeling without knowing

Though Castelfranchi stresses the importance of the body, from a functional point of view, his analysis may be misleading, because it considers feelings as intentional states. In Damasio’s experiments on patients with prefrontal damages, it emerges a difference between the somatic level of feeling and the cognitive one of knowledge. There are some feelings in which these two dimensions are not necessarily connected, because they have not an intentional structure: it is the case of «background feelings».

So, reconsidering Castelfranchi’s functional analysis, we should say that the intentional structure pertains to need (need for...), such as to every cognitive state, needing other cognitive structures (beliefs), not to feeling itself. As Damasio’s background levels of feelings suggest, maybe intentional stance doesn’t pertain to feeling itself, that is, rather, intimately connected with the lowest bodily states.

Acknowledgments

I’d like to acknowledge my tutors for the PhD dissertation in Cognitive Science, prof. C. Castelfranchi, for discussing with me on feeling, prof. Nannini, for his philosophical remarks, and all anonymous students and professors I’ve been discussing with for all this time.

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