

## Imagining Emotion as (Mis)Educative: A Deweyan Prompt

Education is an embodied, emotional affair. Nothing about this claim diminishes the role and power of reason within educational theory and practice. However, if taken seriously, the claim does highlight the lack of a theory of emotion that adequately explains how body, mind and heart interact when human growth is the intention and experience. Without some such theory, educators are handicapped when it comes to interpreting pedagogical circumstances. John Dewey offers a prompt for imagining such a theory.

Available theories of emotion can be loosely divided into two camps, cognitivist (Aristotle, the Stoics, Martha Nussbaum) and feeling (for example, David Hume, William James, Antonio Damasio). Theorizing emotion in the context of education requires facing this division head on. Dewey accepted this challenge, laying out his thinking in two complementary essays that have generally been ignored.

“The Theory of Emotion” is a two-part response to William James’ claim 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*” (1884, pp. 189 – 190).<sup>1</sup> While Dewey jumps on the weaknesses of a feeling theory of emotion, he also acknowledges several powerful elements in James’ formulation: 1) valuing the body in action and the mind as implicated in cognition, volition and affection as dimensions of action; 2) challenging “our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions ... that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression” (James 1884, p. 189). But where James argues simply that “the order of sequence is incorrect” in the typical, largely cognitive view, Dewey maintains that emotion is neither the stimulus nor the response in a unidirectional sequence or “reflex arc,” but an organic circuit that has meaning in reflection on situated action.

In “Emotional Attitudes,” Dewey seeks to reconcile James’ theory of the nature of emotion with Charles Darwin’s principles with respect to emotional attitudes, and to do so in a way that uncovers the spectatorial assumption behind the phrase “expression of emotion.” Says Dewey (1895, p. 569), “so-called expressions of emotions are, in reality, the reduction of movements and stimulations originally useful into attitudes.” Thus, emotions are names for attitudes arising out of action and prompting new action. Most often, these attitudes are unproblematic and unnoticed (because the associated habits of response “work”). However, when habitual responses are ineffective, there is a breakdown of coordination and the affect associated with attitude interferes with rather than reinforces the “efficiency of behavior.” It is to this functional mechanism of adjustment that Dewey turns in “The Significance of Emotions.”

Dewey, predictably, dissolves the dichotomy between thought and feeling using the conduit of behavior. “Emotion in its entirety is a model of behavior which is purposive, or has an intellectual content, and which also reflects itself into feeling or Affects, as the subjective valuation of that which is objectively expressed in the idea or purpose” (Dewey 1896, p. 15). So the function of emotion is the adjustment of affect and object in

action – and affect becomes emotion only when it rises to consciousness and facilitates adjustment.

When “emotional excitement” stems from a failure of coordination, there are three possibilities for resolution, i.e., three external changes that signal – quite differently -- the quality of the act:

- 1) blind discharge,
- 2) sublimation,
- 3) suppression.

In blind discharge, there is affect, but not emotion, as activity is without direction. In suppression, there is no adjustment, but the affect continues to play a subversive role in activity, uncoordinated with the object or activity that prompted the affect. In sublimation, the affect is coordinated *intelligently* with other factors in a continuing course of action. The impulse operates as a pivot for the reorganization of habit. The body works out the struggle of adjustment, the adjustment of habit and ideal.

There is, then, either divided activity or directed activity. Affect arises unbidden in reaction to a set of circumstances and relations in which habits of adjustment are inadequate. The affect is energy, energy that signals a failure of coordination even as it becomes available for new forms of action. If the energy goes unacknowledged or is immediately expressed, there is feeling but no emotion. That is, there is energy present but not used constructively. To reconstruct that energy as a socially constructed emotion is to begin to coordinate it with potential action.

All experience has an emotional “quale” as Dewey puts it, always involving affect, disposition, and object/idea. For Dewey, the disposition anchors the experience. Object and affect are brought together in realized or potential action, and habituated through effective repetition. Distinguishing these three elements is only available in reflection on experience. We can determine the “intellectual value” and “affect value,” but, says Dewey, “in all concrete experience of emotion, these two phases are organically united in a single pulse of consciousness.”

So instinctual stimulation can issue in interest or simple affect (emotional discharge/disturbance). It is interest, says Dewey (1896, p. 30), when “the various means succeed in organizing themselves into a simultaneous comprehensive whole of action. Interest is undisturbed action, absorbing action, unified action.” Interest is also “the power to learn.”<sup>2</sup>

The educational cash value of Dewey’s analysis lies in the integration of the cognitive, affective and physiological dimensions of experience. Emotions that are taken to be causal forces are simply names that condense “a variety of complex occurrences.” Only when educators realize that can they begin to unpack and understand what is actually going on and respond educationally. And our investigation must involve “the whole organism” in an environment that “is never twice alike.”

The limit in Dewey's analysis is his failure to entertain and explore the possibility that the "completed coordination" of the felt affect may not lead to interest and growth, may not be educative. Relations of power, material conditions, cultural mores and social expectations all loom as aspects of person and environment that alter how freed energy is coordinated and directed. Nonetheless, Dewey lays the groundwork for a sophisticated interpretive lens that can improve pedagogical interpretation and response-ability.

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<sup>1</sup> James' (1884, p. 190) most notorious statement of this position is that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and that that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be." He insists that the bodily disturbance is integral to the experience of emotion and not simply the corollary of cognitive activity.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey (1916) makes this point most famously in *Democracy and education*.

### References

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