

Running Head: Truly Enactive Emotion

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Daniel D. Hutto
University of Hertfordshire

Correspondence to:

Professor Daniel D. Hutto

School of Humanities

University of Hertfordshire

de Havilland Campus

Hatfield

Hertfordshire AL10 9AB

Telephone: +44 (0)1707 285655

Email: d.d.hutto@herts.ac.uk

Abstract

An adequate account of emotion must accommodate the fact the emotions have intentionality as well as phenomenality. In seeking to provide such an account, under an enactivist banner, it is suggested that a good place to start is by adjusting Prinz's (2004) Embodied Appraisal Theory (EAT) of emotions. EAT appeals to teleosemantics in order to account for the world-directed content of embodied appraisals. Although this is essentially along the right lines, the basic proposal needs some tweaking. This is because as naturalized account of content, teleosemantics fails. Still the guiding thought behind EAT can be rescued if we switch to a content-free teleosemiotics. This combined with other assumptions yields as truly radical enactivist account of emotion. After explaining the rationale for making the critical adjustment EAT, the modified variant is defended against critics, showing that it offers an adequate framework for thinking about the intentionality and phenomenality of basic human emotions.

KEYWORDS: emotion, enactivism, emotional appraisal theory, teleosemantics

1. Preamble

Cognitivist approaches to the mind stress that engaging intelligently with aspects of the world, always and everywhere, depends on the manipulation of contentful representations in some way or other. The cognitivist credo is: no intelligent activity without

representation. Assuming this to be true of cognition in general, it follows that it is true of anything that counts as social *cognition* – even the most basic kinds of the latter.

In a bid to resist this trend of thought, I promote a radically enactivist approach to basic mentality, defending the view that not every kind of mentality – and certainly not all of the most important or interesting kinds – reduces to or otherwise involves or implicates contentful or representational activity (Hutto 2006, Hutto and Myin forthcoming). In particular, I defend the view that our most elementary ways of engaging with others is phenomenally charged and has intentionally directedness, despite being non-representational. But humans, at least, have – in addition – more sophisticated and articulate means of making sense of others and themselves, as well. My conjecture is that the normal means through which we acquire this high level competence is by participating in narrative practices of a special sort, when appropriately supported by others (Hutto 2008).

I regard these as distinct proposals that, if true (or close to truth) are equally important, *complementary* parts of the full story of what intersubjective relating and understanding involves. Thus I am surprised to discover that Krueger (2010) believes that “by stressing the importance of narrativity and narrative practice in his particular brand of radical enactivism, Hutto perhaps passes too quickly over more fundamental affective structures that scaffold basic forms of social understanding” (p. 68).¹ This complaint is not harsh and it is swiftly followed by a friendly invitation: “I am not asking Hutto to change his story. Quite the contrary. It’s a good story, a challenging story. I’m merely suggesting that Hutto tell his same story once again, *but with feeling*” (Krueger 2010, p. 68, emphasis original). Krueger’s request that I need to augment my account of basic

emotional engagements has echoes of an earlier appraisal that Hobson (2006) gave it. Hobson writes: “I am more or less happy with Hutto’s line of thinking about feeling being a way of experiencing, *if by this he means a quality of experiencing* rather than a particular form of experiencing. I add this qualification because I think feelings are part and parcel of what makes experiences, any experiences, what they are” (p. 180, emphasis added).

The general verdict appears to be that, even though I profess a ‘primacy of affect’ view (one that openly regards emotional engagements as phylogenetically and ontogenetically prior to – and thus distinct from – sophisticated, contentful forms of cognition) there is a suspicion or worry that my version of radical enactivism just isn’t touchy-feely enough. In what follows, borrowing and modifying some ideas from Jesse Prinz, I hope to set the record straight (or at least straighter) about place of feelings in my understanding of emotion.

2. Feelings First: Resisting the False Choice

Many philosophers understand feelings and emotions either exhaustively as, or necessarily involving, contentful cognitions of some kind. Some hold that emotions are evaluative judgements; that they present the world as being a certain way (Solomon 1976). Other that emotions are judgements that involve assenting to ‘value-laden’ appearances (Nussbaum 2001). Others still, think of emotions are construals that require imagining something as if it had certain properties (Armon-Jones 1989).

Although there is no uniform understanding of meaning of ‘cognitive’ or its extension in this literature, as Ratcliffe (2008) astutely observes in “describing emotions as cognitive, philosophers tend to mean at least that they are intentional states of some kind. They either are or at least [essentially] involve evaluations, appraisals or judgements” (p. 20)

Cognitive theories are attractive because they satisfy “a deep intuition that emotions are meaningful. They ... inform us about our relationship to the world, they embody our convictions, and they factor intelligibly into our decisions in life” (Prinz 2004, p. 16). If emotions just are, or essentially involve, contentful cognitions of some kind then apparently they (or their essential components) have the right world-relating intentional properties and the right forms for entering into potential dialogue with our reasoning processes. The recognized downside of cognitive theories is that if this is the whole story about emotion then it is easy to imagine the relevant cognitions (e.g. judgements, appraisals) taking place in disembodied, entirely ‘cold’, ‘detached’ – and, seemingly, ‘unemotional’ ways.

Consider Wells’ heady Martians. They have:

all the complex apparatus of digestion, which makes up the bulk of our bodies, did not exist in the Martians. They were heads – merely heads. Entrails they had none... Men go happy or miserable as they have healthy or unhealthy livers, or sound gastric glands. But the Martians were lifted above all these organic fluctuations of mood and emotion ... Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish

intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being ... (Wells 1898/2005, p. 125-7).

Persuaded by imaginings of this kind, some are persuaded of the truth of some or other version of Somatic Feeling Theory (SFT), according to which emotions just are feelings of bodily changes as they occur.ⁱⁱ This essential Jamesian idea has been revamped in the Somatic Perception Theory (SPT) of the sort advocated by Damasio (1994). The SPT revises the account to allow for emotions to occur even without the relevant bodily changes, just in case the relevant brain activity that monitors the bodily changes is present. Hence, ‘as if’ feelings triggered by central processes in the brain suffice for having certain emotional experiences. It is thought to be an advantage of this theory that it accommodates the fact that subjects claim to experience certain feelings even in the absence of any link to the normal bodily basis for having such feelings – e.g. as is allegedly the case with certain kinds of spinal cord injury.

However, it is a matter of dispute to what extent feelings and emotions can truly exist without any link to normal bodily changes. Questions have been raised about both the vivacity of such reported feelings and whether they should be counted as genuine at all. Also, it has been stressed, that even in the worst cases there is always some degree of bodily feedback that reaches the brain – i.e. thorough information channels that remain open to the brain via the bloodstream or the vagus nerve (see Colombetti and Thompson 2008 for discussion).

Whatever the final outcome of that debate, a more serious charge is that both SFT and SPT “have little to say about the processes by which external stimuli are evaluated for

ecological and social significance” (Hill 2009, p.199). Basically and generally, in reducing emotions to mere feelings, “somatic theories have trouble explaining what it is for an emotion to have an intentional object or target” (Hill 2009, p.200). They lack reach.

Putting all of this together, we should resist the false choice between pure cognitive theories and pure feeling theories. Apparently, what is really needed is an account of “how emotions can be sophisticated cognitive states and, *at the same time*, have bodily feelings as a major component” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 17, emphasis added). *Prima facie*, this looks difficult to achieve. Ratcliffe’s diagnosis is that we will only do so by overhauling some deeply entrenched constraining assumptions: “Central to this overhaul is the abandonment of the distinction between cognition and affect” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 17). I concur – and this, if anything, is a job for a philosopher.

3. Embodied Appraisal Theory: Putting Humpty Together Again?

Enter Prinz’s Embodied Appraisal Theory (EAT)! *Prima facie* EAT has the potential to bring the cognitive and feeling aspects of emotions together again in a unified account. It rejects the conceptualization hypothesis, assuming that judgements and appraisals do not require the possession of concepts. It also rejects the disembodiment hypothesis, assuming that emotions cannot occur without at least some somatic component. But it accepts the appraisal hypothesis, assuming that emotions involve representations of the organism-environment relation. With regard to the latter, EAT follows Arnold (1960) in

stressing that “to appraise something is to see it as affecting oneself in some way that matters” (p. 171).

My game plan is to show how EAT (or something near enough) can be made to work if we make an important technical tweak – a tweak that allow us to address what would otherwise be important objections to foundations of the theory.

EAT is meant to be an embodied theory of emotion, as opposed to a cognitivist theory. It regards emotions as non-cognitive, embodied appraisals. But this is only because it recognizes that emotional engagements involve brain regions other than those in prefrontal areas. For Prinz, this is sufficient for emotions to count as embodied as opposed to cognitive because he holds that “a state is cognitive just in case it includes representations under the control of structures in executive systems, which, in mammals, are found in the prefrontal cortex” (2004 p. 47). Thus Prinz’s non-cognitivism is motivated solely by the fact that, without engaging the neo-cortex at all, “the amygdala can orchestrate the full suite of bodily and behavioural responses that are associated with fear” (Prinz 2004, p. 34). His assumption, of course, is that fear is not special and that the same holds true for other emotions.

Thus, despite being non-cognitive in this peculiar sense, EAT understands emotions to be essentially representational in nature. Prinz’s reasoning is as follows “Appraisal theories claim that emotions *necessarily comprise representations* of organism-environment relations with respect to well-being” (Prinz 2004, p. 52, emphasis added). For this reason, he believes that “to show that emotions are appraisals, one must first establish that they are mental representations” (Prinz 2004, p. 52).

In attempting to establish this, Prinz adopts what is now probably the most popular theory of mental representation – teleosemantics. Accordingly, he holds that “a mental representation is a mental state that is reliably caused by something and has been set in place by learning or evolution to detect that thing ... a mental representation is a mental state that has been set up to be set off by something” (Prinz 2004, p. 54).

On this basis, EAT holds that the relevant representations “can be inextricably bound up with states that are involved in the detection of bodily changes” (Prinz 2004, p. 52). Yet, EAT differs from pure somatic theories such as SFT and SPT, because it also claims that the relevant registrations and detections of bodily changes must be in the service of representing external, objective properties (and not, e.g., response-dependent, secondary qualities).

Plausibly, Prinz insists that emotions must “detect something more than the vicissitudes of vasculature. Otherwise, they would confer no survival advantage” (2004, p. 60). It is by having intentional directedness that aims at things external to the organism that emotions can play their distinctive roles in guiding our activity. Thus “Emotions promote behavioural responses. We [are meant to] run when we are afraid [of something external]. If emotions represented bodily changes this would be unintelligible. We should flee when our hearts race” (Prinz 2004, p. 59).

Nevertheless, Prinz holds that emotions do not have ordinary intentional objects, such as particular objects or people, as their proper targets – accept incidentally. This does not mean that emotions lack intentionality. Rather, as Prinz stresses, emotions are intentional “in their own right” (2004, p. 62). According to EAT, emotions are meant to represent core relational themes, such as loss.

In line with this, Prinz defines the object of an emotion, generally, as the environmental conditions (actual or imagined) that elicit it. Importantly, he goes on to distinguish a *formal* object of an emotion (which is the property in virtue of which an event is meant to elicit an emotion) and a *particular* object of emotion, which is the eliciting event itself (Prinz 2004, p. 62). With these distinctions in place he acknowledges an important ambiguity in our talk of ‘aboutness’, remarking that:

Saying that my sadness is about the death [of a loved one] does not mean that my sadness represents the death; rather it means that the death is what has caused me to become sad. I can continue to think about the death after my sadness subsides, and I can continue to be sad after my thoughts of the death subside (Prinz 2004, p. 62).

In accord with teleosemantics the idea the emotions represent core relational themes translates into the idea that we are ‘set up to be set off’ by events having such thematic properties since they will have mattered to our ancestors.ⁱⁱⁱ Assuming things have not changed dramatically for us, not only do such themes continue to have significance for our well being, it follows that, when conditions are right, we can be made aware of events relating to such themes by registering changes in our bodies (Prinz 2004, p. 68, see also p. 66-67). And so, we come to EAT’s big reconciling idea: “Each emotion is *both* an internal body monitor *and* a detector of dangers, threats, losses, or other matters of concern. Emotions are gut reactions; they use our bodies to tell us how we are faring in the world” (Prinz 2004, p. 69, emphases added).^{iv}

There is nothing *ad hoc* about this proposal from the perspective of teleosemantics. According to biologically based version of that sort of theory of mental representational capacities, “mental representations often work this way. They track real contents via more superficial nominal contents” (Prinz 2004, p. 68). In her frugality Mother Nature supplies us with less than perfect appearance-tracking detectors, not essence tracking detectors. These are good enough to enable us to get by (at least compared to the means used by our ancestral competitors).

A nice feature of EAT’s account of the origins of basic emotional experiences as a way of responding to core relational themes is that it enables us to make sense of misaligned emotional experiences. Hence, “Sometimes we are sad when there has not been any loss. This might occur under the influence of certain drugs (e.g. alcohol), while listening to music, or even while making a sad facial expression. Some cases of clinical depression may involve chronic sadness without any loss” (Prinz 2004, p. 64).

3. Radical Enactivism: Tweaking EAT

EAT has promise, but it is problematic as it stands. EAT can be improved if we abandon its semantic gloss. This can be easily done if we recast EAT as an account of the emotions based on *teleosemiotics*, not *teleosemantics*. Why make this change?

To qualify as representational in a properly semantic and contentful a mental state must play the right kind of role in a larger cognitive economy. It must – so to speak, function to *say* that things stand thus and so. This requires it to meet Ramsey’s (2007) ‘job description’ challenge. But teleosemantic theories only posit states (or ensembles of

states) of organisms that (1) are reliably caused by (or nomically depend upon) the occurrence of certain external features, and/or that (2) are disposed to produce certain effects (under specific conditions), and that (3) were selected because they do (1) and (2).

Yet states that only possess properties 1-3 fail to meet the job description challenge. As Fodor (2008) puts it, they might exhibit some kind of intentional directedness (with a ‘t’) but they do not exhibit intensionality (with an ‘s’). Truly representational mental states must have the proper function of saying ‘things stand thus and so’ as opposed to merely having the proper function of guiding a systems responses with respect to specific kinds of worldly offerings.

Despite initial optimism, many now doubt that attempts to naturalize semantic content by appeal to biologically based accounts have any chance of success. Godfrey-Smith (2006) provides an astute assessment “there is a growing suspicion that we have been looking for the wrong kind of theory, in some big sense. Naturalistic treatments of semantic properties have somehow lost proper contact with the phenomena” (p. 42). Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that the driving idea behind teleosemantics – that evolved structures can have a kind of ‘specificity’ or ‘directedness’ – is essentially correct: “there is an important kind of natural involvement relation that is picked out by selection-based concepts of function. But this relation is found in many cases that do not involve representation or anything close to it” (p. 60). The upshot is that something more would need to be added to the standard teleosemantic theories if the states they posit are to qualify as representational states – i.e. if they are to meet the minimal requirement that Ramsey specifies for talk of mental state *contents* (for more details see Hutto 2008, ch. 3, Hutto and Myin forthcoming).

In short, it is not clear that it is possible to supplement teleosemantic accounts in the required way without going beyond purely biological resources. Thankfully, it is also unnecessary. Nothing important is lost if in the place of teleosemantics we put teleosemiotics. Teleosemiotics is teleosemantics – without the semantic gloss. Teleosemiotics borrows what is best from teleosemantics to provide a content-free naturalistic account of the determinate intentional directedness that organisms exhibit towards aspects of their environments. Yet unlike teleosemantics, it does not seek to understand the most basic forms of directedness in semantic, contentful or representational terms. The it holds that the biologically basic modes of organismic responding are not to be understood as content-involving, where content is understood in terms of reference or truth conditions.

Modifying EAT in line with teleosemiotics confers another advantage, apart from dodging the stated worries about the workability of teleosemantics. Colombetti and Thompson (2008) complain of EAT that, despite promises, it does not qualify as genuine embodied account of emotion because by its lights “the body still plays the role of an objective concomitant of emotion. It is the appraisal component that is seen to be in charge of providing personal significance” (Colombetti and Thompson 2008, p. 54-5).

Their chief objection is that EAT remains separatist: “it holds onto a disembodied conception of cognition (appraisal), and takes cognition so understood to be the source of the meaning of an emotion” (Colombetti and Thompson 2008, p. 55). Against this, they press for the more radical idea that:

cognition is a form of embodied action ... the enactive approach implies that we need to move beyond the head/body and subjective/objective dichotomies that characterize much of emotion theory. Appraisal is *not a cognitive process of subjective evaluation “in the head”* and arousal and behavior are not objective bodily concomitants of emotion. Rather, *bodily events are constitutive of appraisal*, both structurally and phenomenologically (Colombetti and Thompson 2008, p. 56-8, emphases added).

Original variant EAT assumes that the representational vehicles of emotional content are wholly embrained. Presumably, it needn't. Yet, a modified EAT – one which swaps teleosemantics for teleosemiotics – takes things a step further. It denies that we should think of the bodily basis of emotional responses as content carrying vehicles at all. This is because it rejects the semantic model that seeks to understand basic intentionality in terms of contents. In doing so it also rejects all vestiges of the sentential model, upon which the vehicle/content distinction depends. As such, it places no *a priori* conditions on the location or extent of sort of organismic activity that constitutes any token emotional episode, apart from insisting that the dispositions that comprise token emotional experiences are dispositions of the organism. Hence, if we construe EAT as a response-based, as opposed to a standard representational, account of basic emotional engagements, it is wholly amenable to an enactivist (and, potentially, a fully embodied and not merely embrained) rendering. By its lights, there is surely no need to assume that emotional appraisals are solely ‘heady’ affairs.

More importantly, as Colombetti and Thompson stress, enactivism offers a way to truly close the imagined gap between cognition proper, on the one hand, and mere bodily

and affective activity, on the other. This is achieved by adopting a quite liberal understanding of the nature of cognition. Thus Thompson proposes that “cognitive interactions are those in which sensory responses guide action and actions have consequences for subsequent sensory stimulation, subject to the constraint that the system maintain its viability. ‘Sensory response’ and ‘action’ are taken broadly to include, for example, a bacterium’s ability to sense the concentration of sucrose in its immediate environment and to move itself accordingly” (Thompson 2007, p. 125). There seems no compelling reason to rule out such activity as an instance of cognition, albeit quite basic, other than antecedent attachment to the questionable cognitivist credo that all true cognition must involve the manipulation of contentful symbols.

With this in hand, let’s consider Prinz’s acknowledgement that in doing its emotionally work “the amygdala *seems* to be a body control centre, not an appraiser” (Prinz 2004, p. 38). Yet despite how things seem, EAT insists that the amygdala is an appraiser *while also being a body control centre*. It may be true that the amygdala is necessarily supported by a wider set of bodily systems in doing its work. But, under teleosemiotics, nothing precludes the wider set of bodily systems from playing both of these roles, simultaneously. If we accept all of this then it surely possible to close the gap between cognition and mere affect when it comes to thinking about the bodily basis of emotions. This follows if we accept Thompson’s, quite liberal, criterion for being cognitive, rather than Prinz’s pre-frontal criterion. If so, a modified EAT is surely compatible with the kind of enactivism that Thompson promotes, once we let go of Prinz’s restrictive understanding of what counts as cognitive and EAT’s commitment to semantic representationalism.

4. Residual Ratcliffian Worries

A modified EAT does not escape Ratcliffe's (2008) 'thermostat objection'. He contends that a major problem with original variant EAT stems from its commitment to understanding emotions by offering account that would work just as well for understanding very simple modes of response. In his words: "Any account that applies equally to human cognition and to smoke alarms will not cast light on the nature of emotional experience or experience more generally" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 29).

One fundamental problem, according to Ratcliffe, is EAT's endorsement of teleosemantics. For as he sees it, for those who accept teleosemantics "the criteria that something has to fulfil in order to be an intentional or 'representational' state are so minimal that all sorts of unlikely candidates turn out to be intentional in character" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 29).^v As noted, teleosemantics rejects the counterintuitive idea that these very simple systems 'represent' in offering its content-free account of intentionality. Moreover, simple mechanical artefacts – such as thermostats – do not qualify as even exhibiting basic mentality, if we go by Thompson's criteria, since they are not homeostatic, self-creating living systems. But Ratcliffe would regard these technical niceties as cold comfort. For, if anything, replacing teleosemantics with

teleosemiotics only apparently aggravates the gap between what is perceived to be properly human kinds of intentionality as opposed to much more basic ways of being ‘intentionally directed’ at aspects of the world.

However, the correct response to this worry is to note that what is on offer is a *general* schema for thinking about the nature of non-contentful modes of basic mentality – one that covers the responses of simpler organisms as well as *some*, but not all, distinctively human ways of responding. After all, teleosemiotics does not aspire to account for the intentionality of all modes of human responding (see the preamble).

Concomitantly, it is crucial to stress that the specifics matter – the devil is in the detail. Humans, simpler organisms and artefacts (such as thermostats) are neither *set up* to be *set off* by the same things, nor – crucially – do they respond in the same ways to the things that they are set off by. That we can, in principle, specify the targets and profiles of uniquely human patterns of response is enough to ensure that we don’t confuse our basic ways of being intentionally directed with that of simpler creatures or artefacts. And it must be stressed that, unlike simple organisms and artefacts, in addition to our basic ways of engaging with the world and others we also have more sophisticated, content-based ways of doing so.

A different worry Ratcliffe (2008) raises is that EAT “completely dissociates the intentionality of emotion from the relevant phenomenology” (p. 29). And worse, “it has nothing at all to say about experience” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 30). Presumably, the same applies to a modified EAT. In light of the concerns that I have downplayed the importance of feelings in promoting radical enactivism to date (as mentioned in the preamble), it is worth saying a few words about these two concerns in closing.

According to radical enactivism the phenomenal character of emotional responding is identical with, and to be understood in terms of, concrete patterns of environmental situated organismic activity, nothing more nor less. Phenomenally charged experiencing simply equates to the way in which certain creatures are disposed to respond to a range of worldly offerings. But understanding what it is that set up a creature to respond in these ways is a different matter. For this reason, even on the deflated, non-semantic understanding of intentional directedness offered by teleosemiotics, the intentional aspects of emotion do not reduce to its phenomenal aspects (nor *vice versa*). But it, as should be obvious, it does not follow that the intentional and phenomenal aspects are therefore ‘entirely dissociated’.

Unless we conceive of feelings as something extra and logically distinct from organismic ways of responding, as is the wont of qualia-philes, then in providing its general framework, a modified EAT leaves it open that any particular emotional episode or engagement may have a distinctive phenomenal character. And it leaves it open how to best specify that character. For radical enactivists, the phenomenal character of an experience is identified with or determined by special objects of our mental acquaintance. Instead they are identified with specific, concrete activities of sentient beings – extended ways of responding, reacting, acting and interacting. To understand how things seem or feel to us just is to understand this sort of activity.

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ⁱ The charge that I somehow neglect or underplay the fact that interpersonal relating has a crucial affective aspect is even more surprising, given that the author of the charge also recognizes that “For Hutto, the embodied forms of our

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- primary intersubjective engagement ... are not based on ‘understanding’, at least not in some principled or propositional sense” (Krueger 2010, p. 68).
- ii Accordingly, “our feeling of the [bodily] changes as they occur is the emotion” (James 1884, p. 190).
- iii Thus “One can find a common theme behind the range of things that elicit any given emotion ... they are alike in one respect: they all involve ... something valued” (Prinz 2004, p. 61).
- iv As Prinz acknowledges “This is just like somatic theories (James, Lange, Damasio) ... with a new story about the semantic properties of the bodily perception” (Prinz 2004, p. 69).
- v As Ratcliffe observes “For example, it seems that pupil dilation is ‘about’ decreased light intensity, as it reliably detects decreased light intensity and has an appropriate history” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 29). Nevertheless, defender of teleosemantic accounts do not think that any and all biological functionality entails intentionality, co-operating consumer responses of the right kind are also required.