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Note

1. Montague (2016) and Vendrell Ferran (2022) have recently defended versions of this view.

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Commentary: Connecting Müller's Philosophical Position-Taking Theory of Emotional Feelings to Mechanistic Emotion Theories in Psychology

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Abstract

Müller proposes a position-taking theory to account for the manifest image of emotional feelings as "feelings towards". He reduces the process of position-taking to goal-based construal, which is akin to the stimulus-goal comparison process central in appraisal theories. Although this reduction can account for the heat of emotional feelings and the intuition that non-linguistic organisms can also have feelings, it may fail to keep the position-taking aspect on board. Moreover, the image of emotional feelings as active position-takings may itself be questioned and replaced with a passive image. I end by acknowledging that a passive image is still compatible with an active underlying mechanism as is the case in appraisal theories but even more so in the goal-directed theory.

Keywords

feelings, position-taking, appraisal, goal congruence, goal-directed

Müller (2018, 2019) proposes the position-taking (PT) theory of emotional feelings, which he contrasts with the dominant epistemic view in philosophy endorsed by so-called axiological receptivity (AR) theories. Both strands of theories are stimulus evaluation theories, which posit that a process of stimulus evaluation is required to account for the "intentionality" of emotions, the property that they are directed at or about some target or "particular object".[1] For instance, Gina is angry *at* Gino *for* being late, Gino is afraid *of* Gina's scolding, Giovanni is sad *about* seeing Gina and Gino fighting all the time, Gino feels guilty *about* being late, and Giovanni is happy *that* Gina is not angry at him. Each emotion type can take many particular objects, which can be summarized into a single "formal object". Common examples of formal objects are danger for fear, offense for anger, loss for sadness, norm transgression for guilt, and goal satisfaction for joy. Formal objects refer to (dis)values that stimuli can have, short their value properties.

Apart from AR and PT theories both being stimulus evaluation theories, they also show some differences. AR theories hold that stimuli objectively bear value properties such as that they are dangers, offenses, and losses, and that emotional feelings result from the perception of these properties. This perception is depicted by Müller (2018, 2019) as a simple registration of these properties, a passive process with an object-to-subject direction, where the stimulus "speaks" to

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the mind. The PT theory, on the other hand, holds that the value properties of stimuli are relational. Whether something is dangerous, offensive, or a loss depends on the goals of the person.[2] Here, stimulus evaluation is depicted as a position-taking process, an active process with a subject-to-object direction, where the mind "speaks" about, or takes a position towards, the stimulus.[3] Positive and negative feelings are understood as approvals and disapprovals depending on the impact they have on a person's goals.

To clarify the precise way in which Müller (2019) understands position-taking, he contrasts his theory with other PT theories, some of which use the notion of position-taking in a metaphorical rather than a substantive sense (e.g., Mulligan, 2010), and some of which are a mix between PT and AR theories (e.g., Deonna & Teroni's, 2012, attitudinal theory).

Although Müller (2019) is careful to differentiate his PT theory from AR theories and other PT theories, he is less explicit about the motivation for developing his PT theory. What are the problems that the theory is trying to solve? What exactly are the weaknesses of AR theories and in what sense does the PT theory constitute an improvement? True enough, Müller (2019) mentions that AR theories cannot do justice to the "manifest image" of emotional feelings, framed as "feelings towards", marked by a subject-to-object directedness. But how manifest is this image really? And how solid a basis is this image, or any other image for that matter, to reject one theory and replace it with another? Another question that arises is what sort of a mechanism underlies this "position-taking". If it is true, as Müller" (2019) claims, that his PT theory offers a substantive rather than a metaphorical view of emotional feelings as position-takings, then what exactly is the substance of this position-taking?

I will address these questions by drawing connections between Müller's (2019) PT theory and two emotion theories in psychology, namely appraisal theories (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003) and my own goal-directed theory (Moors, 2017, 2022). I am aware that the PT theory is bred in the phenomenological philosophical tradition, which aims to elucidate the nature of feelings, whereas emotion theories in psychology take a mechanistic approach, trying to discover the mechanisms that generate emotions and/or their components. Mechanisms consist of mental representations with a content and a format as well as operations that act on these representations. Despite the fact that PT theories originate from a different tradition, I will nevertheless attempt to analyze this theory through a mechanistic lens. This is possible because questions about the nature of emotional feelings can and have also been addressed from a mechanistic angle.

The commentary is structured as follows. I start with a description of previously proposed stimulus evaluation theories. In addition to the philosophical AR theories already mentioned above, this family also includes appraisal theories in psychology (e.g., Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; see Moors et al., 2013). After briefly sketching the key assumptions of stimulus evaluation theories and their main variants, I point at two objections that have been raised against them. These objections have inspired the development of alternative theories, of which the mixed AR-PT theory of Deonna and Teroni (2012) can be considered one example and the PT theory of Müller (2019) another. The solutions offered by the PT theory come strikingly close to those also offered by appraisal theories. This is because Müller (2019) reduces his position-taking process to a goal-based construal, which is akin to the stimulus-goal comparison process central in appraisal theories (Moors, 2010). It is not clear, however, that after this reduction is done, there is any position-taking left. In a next step, I take a different path by questioning the manifest image of emotional feelings as active position-takings and contrasting it with the image that emotions overtake us and make us feel passive instead. Here, I acknowledge that a passive image does not entail a passive mechanism. Active mechanisms of emotion causation are already present in appraisal theories, but even more so in the goal-directed theory (Moors, 2017, 2022). I close by suggesting that some form of position-taking can still be discerned in the latter theory, albeit a very different form.

Stimulus Evaluation Theories: Key Assumptions and Variants

Stimulus evaluation theories share the key assumption that a process of stimulus evaluation is central to emotions. The outcome of this process determines the occurrence/intensity and quality of the emotion. Within this family, several variants can be identified. First, theories vary in the role they assign to stimulus evaluation (see Moors, 2013, 2022; Reisenzein, 2012). In AR theories in philosophy, stimulus evaluation is seen as a constituent or essential component of emotions (either pure or mixed with other constituents). In some appraisal theories in psychology, on the other hand, stimulus evaluation is seen as the cause of emotions. In other appraisal theories, finally, stimulus evaluation is taken to be both a constituent of emotions as well as the cause of the other components. In the latter variant of appraisal theories, the stimulus evaluation process—here called the appraisal process (i.e., cognitive component)—activates an action tendency (i.e., motivational component), which in turn activates physiological responses (i.e., somatic component), which prepare for and sustain overt behavior (i.e., motor component). Aspects of all these components may surface in consciousness, and the sum of these aspects forms the content of the person's feelings (i.e., feeling component). This means, for instance, that when a person is having a fear episode, her experience can be filled with anything that is happening during that episode, whether it is an appraisal of the stimulus as dangerous, an urge to run away, an adrenaline rush preparing the

body for running, a fearful facial expression, and/or actual running behavior.

A second source of variety between stimulus evaluation theories concerns the content of the output of the stimulus evaluation process. In addition to differences in the precise content of this output, theories also differ in terms of the granularity of this content. Granularity refers to whether the content is described in a molar way with a single value or in a molecular way with a pattern of values that each cover a separate aspect of the content. AR theories in philosophy propose that stimuli are evaluated in terms of the molar values of danger, offense, loss, and so on. Appraisal theories in psychology, on the other hand, unpack these molar values into molecular values such as goal-relevant, goal-in/congruent, un/certain, un/expected, easy/difficult to control, and so on. For instance, they analyze danger into a pattern of the values goal-relevant, goal-incongruent, uncertain, and difficult to control, while they analyze offense into a pattern of the values goal-relevant, goal-incongruent, certain, and easy to control.

A third source of variety between stimulus evaluation theories concerns the format of the output of the stimulus evaluation process. AR theories are perceptual theories, which propose that value properties are represented in perception-like format (e.g., Tappolet, 2016). These are typically contrasted to another strand of philosophical theories known as judgmentalist theories (e.g., Nussbaum, 2001), which propose that value properties (e.g., offense, danger, loss) are represented in belief-like format. In perceptual theories, the person *perceives* being in danger whereas in judgmental theories, the person *believes* that she is in danger. Appraisal theories, on the other hand, do not make any commitments to a single format of appraisals, which means they can have different formats.

The format of value properties in perceptual theories can be connected to their qualification as AR theories. Müller (2019) argues that perceptions have a receptive quality. Just like ordinary perception provides epistemic access to sensory or semantic features of stimuli (e.g., red, apple), emotions understood as perceptions provide epistemic access to the value properties of stimuli (e.g., danger). Beliefs may originate in perceptions but they go beyond them in attaching truth value to them. In perception, a stimulus looks or appears red or dangerous; in belief, a stimulus is judged to be red or dangerous. Judgements involve a kind of "intellectual" position-taking, but this is different from the kind of position-taking that Müller (2019, pp. 97–100) has in mind.

Objections Against Stimulus Evaluation Theories and Solutions

Stimulus evaluation theories have been criticized on several grounds. I zero in on two objections (Moors, 2022). A first objection is that the registration of value properties such as danger, offense, and loss presuppose an organism that possesses abstract concepts, short the abstract-concept objection. Not all organisms to which we ascribe emotions understand the concepts of danger, offense, and loss. A second objection is that stimulus evaluation theories and appraisal theories do not give a satisfactory account of the transition from a cold evaluation into a hot one, short the cold-hot transition problem. A person can evaluate that something is dangerous, yet not experience fear and not be mobilized to prevent harm. The question thus arises at which point a cold evaluation turns into a hot one, short the cold-hot transition problem.

Several philosophical theories have been developed with the aim of providing solutions to these objections (e.g., Colombetti, 2009; Deonna & Teroni, 2012; Griffiths, 2004; Prinz, 2004; Shargel & Prinz, 2018). One solution is offered by Deonna and Teroni's (2012) attitudinal theory.[4] Here, incoming stimuli are first processed in a non-evaluative way, after which they activate a specific action tendency. Due to the fact that this action tendency immediately gives rise to bodily responses that are fed back to the sensory system, the action tendency is immediately felt. Once felt, the action tendency informs the person's experience about the value property of the stimulus. Thus, once a tiger is processed as a tiger or an animal with sharp teeth it activates the tendency to escape and concomitant physiological responses. It is when a person feels this tendency to escape through somatosensory feedback that she feels that she is in danger. Such an evaluation of danger is hot because it comes in the form of a felt action tendency. This solves the cold-hot transition problem. In addition, a wide range of organisms should be capable of feeling action tendencies, including organisms that lack abstract concepts. This should solve the abstract-concept problem.

Müller's (2019) PT theory can be read as providing a different solution to the abstract-concept and cold-hot transition problems. The first move is to argue that value properties reflect the evaluation of stimuli in relation to goals or concerns, that is, anything one cares about. Danger is not understood as a potential harm for physical integrity but a potential harm for any goal. Similarly, offense is understood as the violation of goals or norms that one cares about. And loss is understood as the failure to hold on to something one is attached to. So rather than demanding that organisms possess the abstract concepts of danger, offense, and loss, they only need to be capable of having goals and of evaluating whether stimuli satisfy or frustrate them. This aligns with the molecular approach proposed by appraisal theories, more in particular, with the part in which they argue that stimuli are evaluated as goal-in/congruent.

The second move is to argue that the mechanism underlying stimulus evaluation is not a passive perception or an intellectual belief, but rather an active dis/approval. According to Müller (2019), this makes the idea intelligible that emotional feelings, which are based on this evaluation process, are dis/favorable position-takings. Müller (2019) insists, however, that dis/approval is not a sui generis

mechanism, but he reduces it instead to a goal-based construal. The distinction between goal-based construal vs. passive registration can be aligned with the distinction made in appraisal theories between two operations that have been proposed as potentially underlying the appraisal of goal-in/congruence: a constructive operation in which stimuli are compared with goals, and an associative operation in which a stimulus activates the stored association between the representation of that stimulus and the previously computed appraisal output "goal-in/congruent" (see Moors, 2010). By portraying the stimulus evaluation process as an active comparison process rather than the passive retrieval of stored knowledge, Müller (2019) manages to sidestep the cold-hot transition problem. Indeed, if current goals (i.e., representations of valued outcomes) are "hot", the fate of these goals as determined by a stimulus-comparison process should also be "hot".

Müller's (2019) proposal to reduce the position-taking process to a stimulus-goal comparison process allows the person to truly grasp the impact of a stimulus on her current goals, and in this way, guarantees that feelings are hot. It is not obvious, however, that the aspect of "position-taking" has survived this reduction. Moreover, it is not clear whether the notion of stimulus evaluation as position-taking in the sense intended by Müller (2019) even has an equivalent in psychology. True enough, social psychologists talk about positive and negative attitudes towards stimuli, but these attitudes are position-takings only in a metaphorical sense.[5] Many social psychologists take attitudes to be stored associations between the representations of stimuli and valence labels (Fazio, 2007; Greenwald et al., 2002), which can be activated upon the encounter with stimuli. Others emphasize that attitudes can also be constructed on the fly based on a weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of stimuli (Wilson & Hodges, 1992). In neither of these operations, however, there is a clear trace of the subject-to-object direction that Müller (2019) takes to be manifest in emotional feelings.

Questioning the Image of Position-Taking

Aside from the question whether goal-based construals can or cannot safeguard the position-taking image of emotional feelings, the question can be raised of how manifest the image of emotional feelings as position-takings really is. Working definitions of emotions often highlight the image of being overwhelmed, and thus of passivity, rather than an image of active position-taking or dis/approval. Granted, working definitions of emotions comprise apparent properties of emotions, and these properties need not be real. So whatever "image" one has about emotions need not reflect any real property of them. Thus, the image of emotions as passive does not entail that they arise from passive mechanisms. They may well be active. The constructive mechanism in appraisal theories is a case in point. My own goal-directed theory pushes the activity envelope even further. This theory not only proposes that emotions arise from the evaluation of stimuli as goal-in/congruent—as is the case in appraisal theories—but also that this is followed by an action selection process in which different action options are weighed up and the action option with the highest expectancy for undoing the goal-incongruence gives rise to its corresponding action tendency (see Moors, 2017, 2022). The reason why it often appears *as if* we are passive victims of our emotions is that much of this goal-directed processing goes on below the surface of consciousness. In other words, if our emotions appear to go against our best interests, it is because we are insufficiently aware of what our most valued interests are. Thus, Gina's aggressive outburst seems to invade her because she is unaware that the goal to stand her ground and that is driving her behavior is currently more important than the goal of keeping the peace.

In the goal-directed theory, the evaluation of stimuli and response options (i.e., cognitive component) gives rise to an action tendency (i.e., motivational component), which is manifested in physiological responses (i.e., somatic component) that prepare and sustain overt behavior (i.e., motor component). Each of these components can leave traces in consciousness, and together these traces form the content of the feeling component. Thus, in this theory, feelings are not only based on the evaluation of stimuli, but also on the evaluation of response options, as well as on the ensuing action tendency, physiological responses, and overt behavior. The PT theory of Müller (2019) relates emotional feelings only to stimulus evaluation and is remarkably quiet about the role of the action-related components. Yet if there is anything that comes close to embodying the taking of a position, it may well be these action-related components. Indeed, the tendencies to approach or avoid, for instance, can be literally understood as the tendencies to position oneself as close or far away from an object.

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Notes

1. I use the term "stimulus" in the generic sense as referring to all kinds of events in the person's physical environment, whether these are external (outside the body) or internal (inside the body).

2. I use the term "goal" in the generic sense as referring to goals, needs, concerns, desires, intentions, and wishes. I define "goal" as the representation of a valued outcome.
3. Note that the notions of object-to-subject vs. subject-to-object *direction of feelings* introduced by Müller (2019) do not align with the notions of mind-to-world vs. world-to-mind *direction of fit*. Representations such as beliefs and perceptions are supposed to have a mind-to-world direction of fit. They are fitting if they are accurate, that is, if their content matches with the world. Representations such as desires or goals, on the other hand, are supposed to have a world-to-mind direction of fit. They are fitting if they are fulfilled, that is, if the world matches with their content. AR and PT theories share the idea that emotions have a mind-to-world *direction of fit*. But within those confines, the two theories endorse a different *direction of feelings* according to Müller (2019).
4. The theory is called an attitudinal theory because evaluations of danger, offense, and loss are no longer treated as the contents of representations, but rather as features of the attitude that a subject has towards representations. This attitude is further embodied in the action tendency that the person has vis-à-vis the particular object.
5. Note that this usage of "attitude" (in psychology) is different from its usage in Footnote 4 (in philosophy).

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Emotions as Affective Position-Takings and as Nonconceptual Meta-Representations: A Comparison

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Abstract

The theory of emotions as affective position-takings (PT) is investigated from the perspective of a computational model of the belief-desire theory of emotions (CBDTE) proposed by the author. Both theories assume that a core subset of typical emotion episodes are the products of an evaluation process in which cognized states of affairs are evaluated for their congruence with the person's desires; and that emotions are, on the conscious level, feelings of pleasure and displeasure. However, according to PT the evaluation is a concern-based construal and emotional feelings are

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