

Two Views of Emotions, Two Views of the World

by

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Introduction

Several years ago I became curious about levitation, and borrowed a book from the local public library on the subject. The book did little to convince me of the actual existence of the “skill”, but, at one point, I asked myself “Why do these people believe this?” My answer to that question is the subject of this paper. Its implications are far more reaching than my difficulties with the particular subject.

I came to understand that there are two fundamental views of the world that arise out of two different interpretations of one’s emotions, and that most of us are not aware that a view other than our own even exists in regard to how we make judgments. This is not simply recognition that other people have different values. It is recognition that the methods by which we collect evidence on which to base our judgments and beliefs differ in a very important way.

The effect of the difference in views, simply stated, is that people with the opposite view seem irrational and incomprehensible, regardless of which view we hold ourselves. Others seem to object to things we consider obvious, and hold obvious what we consider obscure and questionable, and no amount of discussion seems to resolve the question.

Speaking personally, discovering the “other” view of evidence has been simply astounding. Hardly a day passes that I don’t see personal, social, and political conflict originating from the two views, over issues that affect all our lives in very profound ways. We adopt our basic belief systems, and manage our lives on the basis of which view we hold, all without even realizing there is an alternative. We define validity, and rationality, without realizing the assumptions we are making about primary evidence, on which these things depend.

The opposite view can seem quite incredulous. My companion, Tannis, for example, considered the opposite of her view preposterous for several days after our initial discussion, until she started seeing what I described in action around her in her everyday experiences. So, please don’t write the ideas off until you’ve lived with them for a few days. Then make your judgment of credibility of these ideas.

The Common Ground

All of us are consciously aware of information derived from at least some of our physical senses. We see. We hear. We taste in several ways. We detect odors. We feel infrared radiation on our skins from the sun and hot stove elements. We feel sensations of touch, from tickle to pressure to pain.

On a subconscious level we sense the direction of gravity and use the information to keep our balance. Some of us have a sense of direction that has been traced to a magnetic element in our forehead. These senses don’t force themselves upon our consciousness like sight and sound, but we do possess the ability to detect and respond to their output at a subconscious level.

We also sense, consciously, internal states such as hunger, the urges to eliminate wastes, libido, pain, overheating or chilling.

From this it should be obvious we have many physical senses beyond the basic five that are casually recognized. But all of these can be stimulated at will by outside manipulation.

As with all sensory equipment, the detectable range of the information is limited. For example, we can hear only over a limited range of pitch. There are also physical phenomena, such as X-rays, for which we have no sensory apparatus at all. This shows that there is information from the real world that we cannot detect directly, but does exist.

The senses we do possess are ways of collecting information about the outside world, and about our internal states of (well) being. The basic information they collect is processed by our brains, based on genetic “wiring” and learned experience, and, generally speaking, enables us to adapt and survive.

We also experience emotional states, frequently induced by information received from these senses. So, for example, if we drift close to a precipice, as determined by our sense of sight, we likely will feel fearful. If something smells awful we find it repulsive. Music can invoke intense pleasure, or fear, or awe, as anyone who listens to movie scores can attest. We all have some skill at reading others’ “body language”, without being consciously aware of what information we are interpreting.

These emotional states are reactions, the result or output of processing information at a subconscious level. They are the way we become aware, at the conscious level, of subconscious assessment of raw information.

But what information? If we can’t detect things that carry information we do not experience any emotional response based on it. But, if an emotion arises, does it always have an objective type of stimulus, like the sounds we hear? Or does it occasionally arise, like an hallucination or over-reaction to benign sounds, from a subjective (brain generated) type of stimulus as well?

Your implicit answers to these questions have a profound effect on how you view the world, as I hope to show below.

The “Single-origin” View *

In this view there is a simple causal chain...<outside stimuli> to <sense organs> to <the subconscious mind> to <conscious awareness (as emotion)>...for every emotional experience.

This isn’t controversial if we are considering conventional types of sensory input. But this view holds that all emotions arise from this causal chain, that outside stimuli are not only sufficient, but also necessary, to produce an emotional experience. That is, the complete causal chain must be present in every circumstance whenever emotion arises. The causal chain has only one place where an emotion can originate, as an outside stimulus. Hence the choice of the term “single-origin”.

Logically speaking, the “necessary” means the causal chain can be reversed, permitting us to infer the presence of an outside stimulus if we have an emotion. In this view *emotions become evidence that some outside stimulus exists*, even if we can’t identify it by any other means.

From a single-origin view any request for other evidence is met with disbelief, because the emotions are evidence, and should be experienced by all (properly equipped) people in the circumstances. Anyone who doesn’t experience the emotions is not tuned to the outside world...they are sense deprived, like a person with a sense disability such as blindness or deafness. (Psychics, for example, always claim unusual sensory ability.)

A person requesting further evidence is seen as irrational, or pedantic and argumentative, or too skeptical, because valid evidence is being offered. To challenge the reality and objectivity of the source of the emotion offered as proof is incredulous. It just doesn't make any sense. It isn't possible for the outside stimulus to be anything but real and objective. Emotions, and all they imply through the causal chain, are obviously real.

Examples of personalities with this view are devout religious people, artists who consider the emotional impact of music or a painting as having captured the "spirit" of their creator or subject, and so on. The extreme examples are sincere psychics, exorcists and the like. Anyone who claims to sense an external, but non-physical, presence is in this class.

The "Dual-origin" View

In this view the subconscious mind is quite capable of generating emotions without outside stimuli, from nothing but stored memories and internal operations. The emotions are still seen as output of the subconscious mind, but the awareness of an emotion has two possible primary points of origin...outside stimuli and internal generation by the subconscious mind. Hence the choice of term "dual-origin".

Expressed in logical terminology, an outside stimulus is sufficient to generate an emotion, but it is not necessary. It is possible for an emotion to arise from either an outside stimulus, the subconscious mind, or both.

In contrast to the single-origin view, the causal chain cannot be logically reversed under these circumstances. We cannot infer from an emotion that an outside stimulus exists. The emotion might originate, in whole or in part, in the subconscious mind instead.

From a dual-origin view, to have someone's emotional state offered as objective evidence seems incomprehensible and highly irrational. That state does not necessitate a source beyond the mind of the observer, as the single-origin observer believes. For evidence to be considered objective for a dual-origin observer it must be something other than someone's emotional experience. There must be some other evidence of physical stimulus, even if the stimulation is accompanied by an emotional experience.

Note that the report by a single-origin observer of an emotion itself is not challenged. It is the implicit inference from this to some outside stimulus as its source that is questioned.

It is also important to recognize that there is an emotional component to the acceptance of any statement or conclusion, even something as passionless as a step in a mathematical proof, under a dual-origin view as well as a single-origin view. Any inference is "shut down" on the basis of becoming satisfied or comfortable that all is well and complete. There is no rational standard for determining when to terminate an analysis or investigation. One just "knows". The feeling is context dependent. It is dependent on availability of input information. It is dependent on one's psychological strengths and analytical skills, and on what has proven effective for them in dealing with life's problems to date.

Examples of personalities with this view are technical people, scientists, and the like, at least in their areas of professional expertise.

Discussion

In reality all of us function using a mix of single-origin and dual-origin modes. We divide the world into categories, and may use one mode in some areas, the other in others. For example, I still find it incomprehensible that a competent physicist or logician can be deeply religious (a fundamental incompatibility is discussed in [1] for anyone interested), but I have met many people who fit the description.

The question of which view is truly correct is not easy to answer, even in principle. It presents a severe epistemological problem in that any analyst that is attempting to show which view is correct and rational must assume one position or the other to make the judgment. The result is likely to be what they are comfortable with, and validates their view and lifestyle. But it is not likely to be psychologically convincing to someone of the opposite view **, no matter how carefully the analysis is performed.

A single-origin observer can always claim that controlled experiments interfere with their sensory apparatus, or that their abilities are capable of detecting phenomena beyond the reach of the methods or equipment of the dual-origin observer. It is always possible to offer evidence of success if the measures of success cannot distinguish between (improbable) coincidence and true efficacy. The single-origin observer believes they have proof already, don't need more, and shouldn't be held responsible for more. They also have explanations for failure that are "valid" within their understanding of how validity should be judged (they simply create causes as necessary, with "obvious" justification for doing so once their emotional experience is accepted).

On the other hand, the dual-origin observer can point to alternate psychological explanations (and experiments supporting them) for subjective phenomena, then invoke Occam's Razor [2]. But which explanation is "beyond necessity"? They can also appeal to burden-of-proof arguments [3] to place responsibility for failure on the single-origin observer. (Objective failure can be attributed to basic lack of sensory ability by a dual-origin observer, rather than experimental interference or absence of the sensory capability.) But the single-origin response is "I have proven these things", and is perfectly rational from that viewpoint.

In either position, however, the arguments beg the question. One must assume a position on how to judge validity and truth to answer the any question about what is, in fact, valid or true.

Given the emerging evidence [4] of the huge role of genetics in personality (40-50%) I'm not sure a fundamental change from one view to the other is possible for a given individual. Consideration of the question, however, can make us more tolerant of the views of others, even if we have a very strong personal preference. The important difficulty arises if we fail to see the possibility of an alternative other than our own, and treat people of opposite persuasion as inferior to ourselves in some related respect without legitimate justification. The implications for theories of ethics and law are enormous. ***

In short, we appear to be stuck with the two views. But, if you have understood what the two views are my objective in writing this paper has been fulfilled.

For those of you who are interested in a bit more evidence on the subject:

The work of Michael Persinger [5] of Queen's University is very illuminating in regard to the question of basic validity. He has studied the phenomena of *déjà vu*, the white-light-at-the-end-of-a-tunnel experience under near death conditions, spooky places, and similar phenomena. To paraphrase his summary: most people will experience an experimental stimulus at the conscious level in some way, but they interpret it according to their belief system. Also, sensitivities to various forms of stimulation vary between people.

The feeling of connection to an outside presence can be invoked deliberately by disciplines such as meditation. Newberg *et al* [6] describe some experiments on the subject. Indeed, this is the theme of the book.

* I'm not totally happy with the terminology, but it was difficult to come up with adequate alternatives. Perhaps the semantic difficulty indicates that the distinctions really are unusual in the culture.

** as an aside, this is not unlike Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in physics in that the observer cannot be removed from the judgment on whether something is rational or not. Like it or not, each of us must assume the basis of our judgments has enough validity to be trusted, because we have no alternative. But we can also recognize that there are some fundamental grounds to consider our judgments fallible under some circumstances, no matter how intensely our emotional experiences suggest otherwise.

*** on this issue, Pinker's book [4] implicitly presents severe challenges to the existing legal and religious systems of the world in that they are all based on the premise that we have free will. If our beliefs and behaviour are actually structurally determined to a significant degree, can we be held morally / legally responsible for our actions? Which actions? In fact, the law has steadily moved toward taking this problem into account in sentencing, much to the chagrin of moral conservatives.

[1] See my paper "Epistemology, the Roots of War" at www.GreatBlue.ca for a discussion of the basic conflict, and a few of its important consequences.

[2] See my paper "Sharpening Occam's Razor" at www.GreatBlue.ca for a fairly extensive discussion of the subject. Briefly, Occam's Razor is the principle "Causes should not be multiplied beyond necessity."

[3] See my paper "On the Burden of Proof" at www.GreatBlue.ca for a detailed discussion of this subject. Briefly, the rule is "The burden of proof rests on the party who is asserting the existential positive."

[4] "The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of Human Nature" by Steven Pinker, Penguin Group, 2002, ISBN: 0-670-03151-8

[5] <http://www.laurentian.ca/neurosci/people/Persinger.htm>

[6] "Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief", by Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugene D'Aquill, M. D., Ph. D. and Vince Rause. Ballantine Books, 2002, ISBN 0-345-44034-X