

Are Emotions Cognition-Free Freedom-Makers?

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Clarence Joldersma's "Overcoming Neuroscience's Lingering Dualism in Cognition and Learning via Emotion" proposes to situate the emotions at the core of agentic being-in-the-world. From an ontological perspective, the piece is a creative attempt to address the more than century-old debate between somatic and cognitive theories of emotion, both of which deny ontological status to purely affective consciousness. Yet in exploring the ramifications of a position that rejects these theories, Joldersma's account transcends the parameters of the debate to offer a picture of emotional affect that both explains and justifies our lived experience as agentic selves fundamentally tethered to the world. As such, Joldersma should be applauded — rather than getting stuck within the limits of existing discourse, he finds a way out that allows him to address the larger implications for how we view ourselves.

I understand Joldersma's argument as follows. Referencing Jaak Panksepp's theory of primal affective consciousness, he argues that emotional affect is neither the output of cognitive processing nor a perception of somatic states. Rather, such raw feels — or basic phenomenal experiences — maintain their own irreducible ontological status. He then adopts Lenny Moss's concept of detachment to define organismic freedom as the ability to buffer the forces of nature, to maintain a fund of possible behaviors to the sensed environment.¹ Returning to Panksepp, he claims that felt emotion acts as a sensorimotor buffer by defining global neuromental heuristics for behavior in terms of something that matters. This is precisely where a commitment to an ontology of emotional raw feels pays necessary dividends, for it is the precisely the valence and intensity of emotions-as-felt that enables something to matter in the first place. Finally, the behavioral versatility that results from this heuristic guidance allows emotion to serve the role of "freedom maker," imparting a phenomenological sense of being in the world through flexible sensorimotor coupling.

While this argument offers much to discuss with regard to education, I restrict my comments to the argument itself, particularly its ontological commitments and its characterization of emotion as "freedom maker." To put my own cards on the table, I wholeheartedly agree that emotion-as-felt deserves ontological self-sufficiency, whether this simply validates the viability of psychological terms in neuro- and cognitive-scientific endeavors, or truly helps to bridge the physico-phenomenal divide that has dominated Western thought since Descartes. And conclusive or not, Panksepp seems to have made a legitimate case for the existence of "cognition-free" primal affect. That said, my concern over completely eschewing a necessary cognitive contribution in an account of the emotions stems from the observation that Panksepp limits his account of primal affective consciousness to only seven emotions — seeking, lust, rage, care, play, fear, and grief. This invites the rather obvious question, "What about the other ones?" Is cognitive processing required for the raw feels of loneliness, guilt, shame, and even joy and sadness? As Joldersma himself

notes, Panksepp describes these as “mixed” emotions, which suggests that we face the choice to either relegate them to some second-class status or acknowledge that some emotional feels require something additional to account for their emergence. Thus, I suggest it is problematic to rely solely on Panksepp’s elaboration of primal affect to argue for the irreducibility of the entire emotional domain.

For clarity’s sake, Panksepp offers two reasons for rejecting cognitive accounts of emotion.² First, such accounts rely on an uncritiqued concept of reward, one that begs the question how and why a reward is itself seen as a reward. Indeed, Panksepp argues that any such critique would eventually return to the idea of emotional raw feels. Second, postulating the output of the brain stem and limbic system as a readout devoid of affective character imposes what Panksepp describes as an “unparsimonious neuro-dualistic view of emotional feelings,”³ one that accomplishes no more to explain the emergence of raw feels than the simple assumption that such output is itself the raw feel. This is the classic homunculus problem where the reader of a readout already has to be conscious for the reading to explain the emergence of consciousness. Given that the physico-phenomenal bridge cannot be crossed in either case, we might as well commit to the simpler explanation.

These criticisms apply equally to somatic theories. And if we accept them as reasons for moving on from both views, Joldersma is justified for seeking an alternative theory. However, this seems to present a problem. On one hand, any alternative view has to reject the identification of cognitive and somatic processes with emotional affect. Yet few, if any, argue that nonprimal affect exists without cognitive and/or somatic processing. The solution, I believe, requires that we distinguish between identification and necessary contribution. That is, a theory of emotions that could grant ontological status to both primal and mixed emotions could acknowledge the need for cognitive and/or somatic processing if it denied that emotions were *solely* that processing. Indeed, such models do exist. Paul Thagard and Brandon Aubie, for one, offer their EMOCON model, which grants ontological distinction to the emotions while requiring extensive contributions from cortical regions known for cognitive processing.⁴ And they reconcile these seemingly conflicting aspects of their model by suggesting that emotional raw feels are not the result of such processing, but can simply be identified with the large-scale neurodynamics of the entire system — the brain stem, limbic components, and neocortex. They state:

[Emotion] is not just a perception of bodily states, nor is it just a cognitive appraisal of one’s overall situation. Rather, an emotion is a pattern of neural activity in the *whole* system ... Emotional consciousness is *not* represented as an output from any of the brain areas or their combination. Rather ... emotional consciousness *just is* the overall neural process that takes place in the interacting brain areas.⁵

The EMOCON model illustrates how to make good on the need for cognition in theories of emotion that account for both primal and nonprimal affect while abandoning the ontological parameters of the somatic/cognitive debate. Rather than rely on a neuro-dualism where consciousness emerges from a homuncular “reading of a readout,” EMOCON postulates that raw feels are the flipside of large-scale neural activity. This dual-aspect monism is also at the core of Panksepp’s theory of primal affect, where raw feels exist as raw feels for no reason other than their base ontology.

Both Panksepp and Thagard and Aubie acknowledge the centrality of this monism to their views, with Panksepp explicitly adopting it as a “simplifying assumption,”⁶ and Thagard and Aubie claiming that it “survives as the best current explanation of what we know about emotional experience.”⁷ Yet, as an assumption or “the best explanation,” such monism begs for additional explanation. Indeed, in wanting to grant ontological status to felt emotion, I would suggest that the dualism that really needs to be addressed is not a cognitive/somatic dualism, but rather the physical/phenomenal dualism — what we call the hard problem of consciousness. For it is not that we cannot grant ontological status to emotions if they exhibit necessary cognitive contribution, but rather that in doing so, we are forced to decentralize the source of raw feel. As such, genesis of affect cannot be described as the activity or output of a particular process but instead requires identification with the physical state itself. Such identification demands that we explain how physical activity can manifest affectively.

Finally, I would like to comment on Joldersma’s characterization of emotion as a source of freedom. Whether or not one buys into the attempt to conceptualize agency through Moss’s idea of detachment, I find it difficult to base such detachment on Panksepp’s description of primal affect. Panksepp himself might be the source of the problem, as he describes primal affect both as an anticipatory mental heuristic that buffers the individual from random environmental perturbations and as a set of self-motivating urges that propel behavior. While a focus on the mental heuristic description does seem *prima facie* compatible with the idea of detachment, it is difficult to ignore the tension created by numerous statements promoting primal affect as a set of evolutionarily developed instinctive urges. For example, consider Panksepp’s claim that “The positively valenced SEEKING/Expectancy urge links up with a host of brain learning processes, which at the highest psychological levels may reflect wants and desires.”⁸ Here, not only is primal seeking characterized as an urge, but Panksepp suggests that such urge may be felt/perceived/understood by nonprimal consciousness as wants and desires. Or consider the statement that “the urge to play was also not left to chance by evolution, but is built into the instinctual action apparatus of the mammalian brain.”⁹ In this case, primal affect is associated with instinct, which further highlights the contrast with the mental heuristic view. Indeed, while something may appear to “be at stake” when urges motivate action, the deterministic overtones of such biological value-encoding make it difficult to mesh with a depiction of emotion as the root of nondeterministic action.

Despite my stated concerns, I think that Joldersma is right to reject the parameters of the cognitive/somatic debate. It is perhaps a sign of hope that seeds of change can be found in neuro- and cognitive science as well. The positivist attitude that dominated acceptable theory of mind discourse for much of the twentieth century has progressively unraveled, with the move to grant ontological status to the emotions a welcome next step in the process.

1. Lenny Moss, “Detachment, Genomics and the Nature of Being Human,” in *New Visions of Nature: Complexity and Authenticity*, ed. Martin A.M. Drenthen, F.W. Jozef Keulartz, and James Proctor (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2009), 107.

2. Jaak Panksepp, "Affective Consciousness: Core Emotional Feelings in Animals and Humans," *Consciousness and Cognition* 14, no. 1 (2005): 30–80.
3. *Ibid.*, 64.
4. Paul Thagard and Brandon Aubie, "Emotional Consciousness: A Neural Model of How Cognitive Appraisal and Somatic Perception Interact to Produce Qualitative Experience," *Consciousness and Cognition* 17, no. 3 (2008): 811–834.
5. *Ibid.*, 817.
6. Panksepp, "Affective Consciousness," 38.
7. Thagard and Aubie, "Emotional Consciousness," 830.
8. Panksepp, "Affective Consciousness," 48.
9. *Ibid.*, 54.