

The full world of emotions

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The problem of putting emotions in a box

There have been a number of existential-phenomenological theories of emotional experience including that of Heidegger, Sartre and Scheler.

These approaches have two central concerns in common:

- That any understanding of emotional experience needs to reflect the intimate interconnections between emotion, gesture, symbol, expression, situation, social context, bodily sensation, temporality, personal identity, and all of the other terms by which we have packaged and categorised the seamlessness of Being-in-the-world. A phenomenological epistemology would like to remember that there is nothing essentially bounded about the ways we have conventionally labelled and split up experiences (such as a category like ‘emotion’); that emotion is never ‘alone’ and that the understanding of emotion cannot be abstracted from its total seamless context.
- That an understanding of **human** emotional experience is complex. Both psychological development and cultural modification require models of understanding emotional experience that are multi-layered. Such a notion of multi-layered experience sets up a ‘dynamic’ dimension to human emotionality: how these various levels of experience and action, from primitive ‘impulses’ to wide and subtle feelings, affect and influence one another.

Eugene Gendlin’s levels of emotional complexity

These two concerns have been taken forward by Eugene Gendlin in interesting and distinctive ways. Here I draw mainly on a book chapter entitled ‘A Phenomenology of Emotions: Anger’ (Gendlin, 1973), which was one of his earliest attempts to articulate his theory of emotions, and have appeared to have stood the test of time throughout his many later publications.

Gendlin distinguishes between three kinds of emotionally-relevant experiences in human beings: routine emotions, situational emotions and felt meaning. All of these three levels are interactive and functional, but each is wider and more complex than the former.

Before we consider these levels, let us look at how Gendlin sees all emotionally-relevant experiences. The way the body lives as an experiencing organism is crucial in providing a greater ‘set’ of organising principles for the ‘sub-sets’ of particular experiences. He shows, by using many examples, how the lived body is both functional and interactive. So for example, in hunger, there is an implication of food with all its possible interactions (such as digestive readiness, behavioural seeking, and

elaborated social routines). The implication of these interactions are also functional in that they are purposive, moving toward the resolution of a 'wanted' outcome. In a sense, this interactive functionality of the lived body is future oriented (moving forward in a motivated way) and interactively open (in the world of relations outside itself). Now, as a sub-set of bodily experience, emotionally-relevant experiences are also functional and interactive. Anger as a 'readiness-to-fight' or as a readiness to overcome a barrier, is full of intention (functionality) and perception of a fight-needed situation (interaction). Such emotionally-relevant experience cannot be understood without understanding such functionality and interaction. Whether it is logical or not from an external perspective is a separate matter.

And here we come to three levels of emotionally-relevant experience in humans: routine emotions, situational emotions, and felt meaning.

Level one - Routine emotions

There is a 'generalised' or 'routinized' part of anger that, in a sense is 'wired' into us or 'handed down'. In anger, for example, this 'explosive' felt quality comes to us in many different situations and is very similar, in essence, between us. So anger, at this level has much 'sameness' about it in the way that it implies a narrow set of physical fight-readying chemicals and behaviour. This level of emotionality is closer to a universally patterned relational structure.

Level two - Situational emotions

We have an inner life. To quote Gendlin (1973) : "We can take the situation which rouses our fight-readying home with us, and become fight-ready even when the opponent and context aren't present." p. 376. We thus 'carry' a historical sense of various situations around with us as background contexts to new situations. Also, as our situations differ in different cultures, so do our emotions. Gendlin refers to an example of the American anthropologist, Geertz, who did not recognise a kind of feeling that Javanese felt in the presence of a spiritual saint (the closest Geertz could come to the word was 'awe' and 'respect', but this wasn't quite right either). So, situational emotions can build a lot of complexity and subtlety into them. They imply particular kinds of personal and cultural history and meanings, and are the culmination of a developmental sequence of modifications to both shared and bodily-feeling life. As humans, we have developed many words that refer to a great diversity of subtle emotional qualities beyond the 'general' emotions of fear, anger, and sexual and parent-child love. Even coming to so called 'romantic love', we have elaborated and experienced many distinctions. So the complexity of situational emotions in human history have 'emerged' and we have developed a more complex vocabulary to attempt to do justice to the subtlety of these emergent experiences --- such as a 'sense of poignancy', a 'bitter-sweet feeling' or 'an ironic humorous feeling'. Often, we don't have words for many of these and may say "I feel as if I were..." Such complexity is multi-layered and may move beyond the so-called clarity of one thing or another, either fear or anger. As poets understand, human existence is full of 'mixing', and emotional consciousness is wide enough to allow these emergent, and even novel, emotional qualities to come.

Level three - Felt meaning

Beyond routine emotions and situational emotions, Gendlin sees a further, more complex, emotionally-relevant experience that human beings have developed. This is the capacity to broaden one's attention to notice the felt qualities of a whole situation that contextualises a series of specific situational emotions or feelings of routine emotionality. Here, attention is widened to find a 'felt' quality to 'what we are in'. Implicit to this is that a felt quality can form that tells us more about the relational/functional background that is 'before' and 'larger than' the delineation of specific situational emotions. This felt background can be directly sensed as a quality in itself, and then reflected upon, to differentiate a number of situational emotions, as well as routine emotions, that may interact and change from one to another. One is then not focused on a particular emotion, but focused on a broader, felt quality that encompasses a number of emotionally-relevant experiences and situations. Such a focus brings a more fluid experience. This dimension emphasises how our experiences are holistic and interrelated. Such interrelated and holistic dimensions can themselves have felt qualities larger and more complex than particular routine or situational emotions.

Gendlin uses the example of 'being in' a situation with a policeman. One may simply get 'sucked into' a routinized emotion such as fear or anger, or a specific situational emotion such as a sense of quiet caution. Being simply moved by the sense of quiet caution may result in a particular trajectory of behaviour, one possibility being, to act in an excessively unquestioning way. So, in such a situation, getting 'sucked into' the situational emotion may become a habitual pattern that reduces the likelihood of responding in other possible ways that require novelty. A felt meaning is a broader focus. In noticing and feeling the quality of the whole complex experience, it first comes as a feeling of "all that". As human beings living with language, we are able to symbolise and describe "all that". "All that" turns out to be much more than just one routine or situational emotion to which we may automatically react (either by repressing or expressing). In attending to felt meaning, the interrelationship of a number of emotion-implying meanings may emerge. To quote Gendlin(1973) , this level of felt meaning comes when " I put myself into this whole situation I am up against, rather than just this already thinly defined routine pattern." p389.

A number of different levels of personal meaning and context may become more explicit when this broader 'having' of one's situation is attended to. So, for example, "in" attending to a broad felt meaning that may first look like a 'feeling of threatened constraint', a number of different feelings, levels and meanings may emerge: the felt importance of where I was going, the feeling that I have allowed others to control me too often in the past, that it is important for me not to stereotype the policeman, that there is "all that" about my need to keep the peace (a long story which seems to resonate with many other personal stories). "All this" and more is "in" the felt meaning and contains endlessly more facets than can possibly be separated out.

Yet one can have "all this" in the immediacy of a felt meaning as a whole, even though it may take time to articulate and symbolise what is "in" it. Such felt meaning comes in wholes rather than parts. Gendlin thus sees this level of attending to experience as a particularly human emergent capacity, one that announces an ability to 'stand back' and feel the quality of the "all that" that enters into the constitution of

specific emotions. He would say that the felt meaning of an “all that” is different than, and more complex than, routine and situational emotions. The main differences are that it breaks the routine between feeling and action, and can find a more specific ‘next step’ that takes account of the personal complexity of the situation. This may allow the possibility of a form of emotional intelligence that does not rely on mere general logic and rationality, but which can be informed by the more holistic intelligence of one’s uniquely situated, emotional context, in relation to one’s personal identity and history.

So what relevance may Gendlin’s distinctions have for emotional processing?

Emotional processing: unpacking the fullness of emotions

Gendlin developed a form of therapeutic emotional processing which he calls ‘focusing’. It partially addresses his concern that our theory of emotions has substituted ‘thin schemes’ for the complexity of concretely lived experience. Thus, for example, he was critical of ‘energetic’ theories of emotion that encouraged ‘catharsis’:

“It is a silly notion that anger is some sort of hostility fluid that is simply in people and has to be got out by catharting” (Gendlin, 1973, p.385).

His method of focusing involves two essential components:

- broadening attention to the felt meaning level that is larger than specific routine and situational emotions, ----- allowing the felt quality of ‘how things are’, to form
- neither repressing this experience nor reacting to it, but differentiating the ‘facets’ of it in language and checking the credibility of these ‘facets’ experientially in relation to the ‘felt sense’ to see whether they are distinctions that ‘fit’.

These two components move back and forth in which new descriptions change the felt meanings in the body and the changed felt meanings become further described. The benefits of this experiencing-symbolising process is that it goes in both an inner and outer direction. In broadening inner attention, one feels what may ‘be there’ beyond the routine, repetitious and general ways of labelling one’s experience and emotion. This increases felt credibility and a heightened sense of oneself as a unique person. In symbolising or languaging this inner attention, one moves outward to forms of possible interaction and responsiveness that are more nuanced and more novel than the action-sequences that have been patterned by more routine and situated emotions. Emotions can still carry great power and depth, but may ‘fit’ the uniqueness and novelty of ‘this’ particular moment more intelligently.

Gendlin (1973):

“One gets past routine pattern or anger when letting oneself feel the whole situation. Only here is uniqueness. The felt meaning is also patterned , but so multiply patterned as so richly related to so much else, that it can only be felt as a whole and not via given sequences, however many.” p389

“Without the felt meaning made to come home to me whole, I would simply be in the routine patterns.” p390

Gendlin does not want to control or repress routine or situational emotions. The level of focusing on felt meaning, however, gives them a more fluid context and a greater possible freedom for flexible expression. Each of the three levels of emotionally related experience are ultimately implicated and enfolded into one another, but the broader ones re-organise and re-direct the narrower.

In conclusion, it could be said that Gendlin recommends a form of emotional processing that attends to the ‘more’ of emotion, and sees a developmental emergence in our increasing capacity to experience, differentiate and act from these ‘mores’.

Reference:

Gendlin, E.T. (1973) A Phenomenology of Emotions: Anger. In Carr, D. & Casey, E.S.(Eds). *Explorations in Phenomenology: Papers for the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. pp367-397.