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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF ANTONIO DAMASIO'S THEORY OF EMOTIONS

abstract

Antonio Damasio's Theory of Emotions has deeply contributed to the understanding of the cognitive significance of affective states and of the relation between embodiment and cognition. Nevertheless, in this paper I argue that his account is inadequate from a phenomenological point of view. In the first place, I suggest that Damasio doesn't provide a plausible analysis of the intentionality of emotions, ignoring both the intentional structure of feelings and the variety of objects they can be directed at. Secondly, I claim that by adopting a physiological approach to the study of emotions he can hardly account for their responsiveness to education and thus for the idea that it is possible to speak of responsibility also with regard to affective life. Besides, I suggest that Damasio doesn't provide a plausible description of the way we become aware of other people's affects, because he argues in favour of a separation between external behaviour and inner mental states.

keywords

Damasio; emotions; feelings; intersubjectivity; intentionality; phenomenology

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In this paper I will discuss the main intuitions of Antonio Damasio's Theory of Emotions from a phenomenological perspective suggesting that, even though his approach has deeply contributed to the acknowledgement of the cognitive value of affects, the account he proposes is inadequate under various respects. In particular, I will argue that his theory misconceives the intentionality of emotions, their responsiveness to education and the intersubjective aspect of affective experience.

1. Damasio's Theory

1. 1. Emotions and homeostatic regulation

According to Damasio, emotions are particular states of the organism generally dependent upon the relation with the environment. They are regarded as homeostatic reactions, namely as regulatory processes which contribute to the survival and the biological wellbeing. Therefore, along with metabolism, the immune system, impulses and motivations (Damasio 2004), also emotions and feelings would help to reduce the negative effects of dangerous situations and to take advantage of favourable circumstances. Considered as the outcome of either pre-organized or learned response mechanisms, complex sets of neural and chemical reactions which give rise to various organic modifications, they have a fundamental role also in decision-making processes (Damasio 1995)[1].

1.2. Primary, secondary, background emotions and feelings

Damasio maintains that affective states do not constitute an homogeneous category. In his opinion, anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness and surprise are "primary emotions" (1995), articulate neurobiological responses which, because of their being innate mechanisms, respond to stimuli and give rise to behaviours that are very uniform. However, he believes that also voluntary and non pre-determined cognitive processes could play a role in the development of emotions and argues that it is possible to identify emotional states to the emergence of which both evaluative judgments and personal experience are fundamental. Conditioning processes, in his view, would have a remarkable role also in the extension of affective sensitivity: on this basis, several aspects of personal and interpersonal experience would acquire affective significance, thus becoming the source of the so-called "secondary" or "social' emotions" (1995).

[1] Indeed, in the author's words: "Well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly. These results and their interpretation called into question the idea of dismissing emotion as a luxury or a nuisance or a mere evolutionary vestige. They also made it possible to view emotion as an embodiment of the logic of survival" (Damasio 2000, p. 42).

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Within this frame of reference, the number of potential inducers is indeed considered to be "infinite" (2000, p. 58)[2].

Apart from the primary and the social ones, Damasio identifies a third fundamental category of affective states, namely "background emotions" (2000, pp. 52-53). He maintains that background emotions are responses provoked by internal conditions generated by diverse physiological processes, by the interaction of the organism with the environment or by both factors. The inducers of these emotions, then, would be mainly "internal" in character and they would result from a plurality of regulatory mechanisms operating simultaneously.

Finally, it is important to note that, according to Damasio, emotional reactions are not necessarily felt by the subject. Emotions are consciously experienced only when a specific set of neural processes takes place and feelings of emotions[3] consist in the perception of the bodily modifications which constitute emotional reactions[4-5].

[2] Damasio argues that secondary emotions usually stem from cognitive evaluations, conscious mental representations directed at specific objects (1995). However, in his opinion, although these reactions differ from the basic ones, it is possible to claim that there exists a structural connection between primary and secondary emotions dependent on the fact that certain elements of primary emotions become constitutive parts of secondary emotions by undergoing only partial modifications. With reference to this point, for example, he maintains that contempt, which is deemed to be a typical secondary emotion, shares many features, and in particular facial expressions, with disgust, a primary emotion that, from the evolutionary point of view is connected with the avoidance of potentially dangerous food (Damasio 2004, p. 62).

[3] Damasio uses the term "feeling" in order to designate every conscious perception of bodily states, emotional responses or other regulatory mechanisms.

[4] Feelings, thus, are considered as the conscious perception of bodily changes and are regarded as dependent on the existence of the so-called "proto-self" (2000, p. 154), that is the articulate and constant representation of bodily states at the neural level. Indeed, in Damasio's opinion, consciousness, even in the basic form of "core consciousness", is grounded on the neurobiological capacity to collect and connect information regarding two specific elements: an external or internal object and the body itself. In this context, consciousness is viewed as the outcome of the capacity to have a neural representation of how a particular object has modified the bodily conditions and Damasio refers to the "sense of self" as a fundamental aspect of his conception (Damasio 2000, p. 7). From this point of view, by departing from the theories which consider consciousness and self-consciousness to be separate phenomena, he seems to suggest that the two should be identified, thus emphasizing the fact that experiences are always lived by the subject as his own experiences. "If 'self-consciousness' is taken to mean 'consciousness with a sense of self', then all human consciousness is necessarily covered by the term – there is just no other kind of consciousness as far as I can see" (2000, p. 19). [5] It is worth noting that, although in Damasio's work the notion of feeling is usually employed to designate the conscious experience of an emotion, the author maintains that there is a difference also between "feeling" and " knowing that we have a feeling" (2000, p. 36), thus suggesting that the presence of the neural and mental representations which constitute feelings does not necessarily entail that we are conscious of these events. Indeed he claims: "[...] I separate three stages of processing along a continuum: *a state of emotion*, which can be triggered and executed nonconsciously; *a state of feeling*, which can be represented nonconsciously; and *a state of feeling made conscious*, i.e. known to the organism having both emotion and feeling" (2000, p. 37). However, in his work "feeling" is often used to indicate the emotions we are conscious of and, for the sake of simplicity, this is the definition I refer to in this paper.

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2. Critical evaluation of Damasio's intuitions

In Damasio's account, emotions are of a fundamental importance to both short- and long- term decisions. The information they convey concern the biological value of particular stimuli and, as shown by the "somatic-marker hypothesis" (1995), they positively influence our choices and can give rise to actions which are beneficial under the physiological point of view. Damasio's research, therefore, largely contributes to the rejection of the idea that there exists a radical opposition between emotion and cognition and between bodily processes and cognition.

2.1. Emotion, cognition and embodiment

First, since emotions are regulatory devices and the information they provide has a cardinal role in decision-making processes, they are attributed cognitive significance, thus making it impossible to keep on thinking that reason and affects are totally opposite phenomena. Secondly, by drawing attention to the role of both the body and the brain in the realization of emotional states, Damasio brings further evidence to the idea that mental functions are essentially modulated by the organism, namely that they are essentially embodied (Clark 1997; Gallagher, Zahavi 2008; Merleau Ponty 1945; Varela *et al.* 1992)[6].

2.2. Intentionality and feeling

Despite these important intuitions, it seems that Damasio's Theory either ignores or misunderstands some essential characteristics of affective experience as an experience undergone from a first-person perspective.

In the first place, his approach doesn't adequately account for the intentionality of emotions. Emotions seem to be directed at specific objects which define their character (De Sousa 1987; Scheler 1916) but, according to Damasio, feeling an emotion is equal to perceiving how the organism has been modified by

[6] Furthermore, as observed by Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), the hypothesis introduced with regard to the structure and constitution of the "sense of self" shares some important features with a phenomenological account of the topic. In the first place, it is important to observe that in Damasio's account there seems to be no difference between consciousness and self-consciousness and this idea is typical also of phenomenological approaches. Indeed: "In contrast to higher-order theories, phenomenologists explicitly deny that the self-consciousness that is present the moment I consciously experience something is to be understood in terms of some kind of reflection, or introspection, or higher-order monitoring. It does not involve an additional mental state, but is rather to be understood as an *intrinsic* feature of the primary experience" (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008, pp. 52-53). As outlined before, in order for core consciousness to emerge, at the neural level there should be a representation not only of the object we are conscious of, but also of the organism that by the interaction with that object is modified. The most basic form of consciousness, therefore, depends on the representation of the relation which exists between the proto-self and a particular object. Damasio, then, rejects the idea according to which the emergence of self-consciousness is dependent upon the mastery of particular uses of language (e.g. Baker 2000) and concepts and argues on the contrary that these capacities arise from a pre-verbal experience of the self. In accordance with investigations carried out in both Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind (Bermúdez 1998; Gallagher 2005), he believes that there is a form of self-awareness which is pre-linguistic in character and a further point of contact with the phenomenological perspective consists in the fact that both attribute to embodiment a central role in the constitution of this kind of consciousness.

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the interaction with a particular environmental condition or by an internal event. Therefore, these phenomena would consist in the perception of the modifications which have taken place in the body in response to a specific stimulus[7]. However, it is possible to wonder if this is a faithful account of emotional experience: is feeling an emotion identical with perceiving a particular bodily condition, possibly accompanied by the mental representation of the stimulus by which it has been elicited[8]?

Our ordinary experience deeply contradicts this idea. When feeling admiration or contempt for someone, for example, we experience not only a particular bodily state, but one or more qualities of the person we are interacting with. In particular, emotions seem to be about the different value properties which can define people, events or states of affairs (De Monticelli 2003; Mulligan 2010 Scheler 1916). Goldie has drawn attention to the intentional aspect of affective states by claiming that, apart from bodily feelings, it is possible to speak of "feeling towards" (2000, p. 58), that is feelings directed at a variety of different objects[9]. Therefore, bodily feelings, rather than exhausting our emotional experience, would constitute only a particular form of it.

Furthermore, it is important to observe that in everyday emotional experience phenomenal properties do not seem to be separate from the intentional aspect of affective states. On the contrary, it is possible to claim that when we emotionally react to particular features of an object (for example, we experience fear in front of a ferocious dog), the "what it is like" (Nagel 1974) of our experience seems to be exactly the means by which the characteristics of the objects we are dealing with are appraised. As suggested by Goldie, emotions cannot be considered as neutral perceptions of particular properties accompanied by distinct bodily feelings

[7] Damasio argues that emotions can take place also in absence of real bodily changes when an "as if body loop" process is realized at the neural level (2000, p. 281). This element, however, does not change the main claim of his theory, namely the idea that emotions are felt when there is a perception of bodily modifications, no matter whether these are real or not.

[8] Furthermore, the distinction between "emotions" as mere bodily modifications and "feelings" as the conscious perception of those bodily modifications is in itself highly counterintuitive. Indeed, when speaking of "emotions" we usually refer to conscious, rather than unconscious, affective experiences and we do not usually consider "feeling" and "emotion" as two distinct phenomena.

[9] As far as bodily feelings are concerned, however, Goldie argues that they are always directed at the body and that they can be about the world only by "borrowing" the intentionality of the "feelings towards" (Goldie 2000, p. 57). With reference to this point, I agree with Ratcliffe (2008, p. 35) in maintaining that the idea that bodily feelings cannot be world-directed is implausible from a phenomenological point of view, but I think that Goldie is right in claiming that not all intentional feelings are bodily feelings. By means of these experiences, indeed, we do not perceive only the conditions of the organism in a particular circumstance: rather, emotions and other affective reactions consist in the perception of different kinds of qualities which define various aspects of reality.

(2002, p. 40). On the contrary, feelings themselves rather than merely coexisting with intentional states would have a peculiar intentional character, thus allowing for the rejection of an absolute distinction between phenomenal and intentional mental states (De Monticelli, Conni 2008).

Moreover, we experience a wide variety of feelings and not all of them can be equated with the bodily sensations previously described. Social emotions such as pride, shame, embarassment or admiration, for example, do feel in specific and distinct ways, but these feelings, although they can be combined with particular bodily sensations, seem to be different, and, to a certain extent, autonomous states. In addition, as far as bodily feelings are concerned, it is possible to question the idea that they consist in the perception of the body as an object (Ratcliffe 2008). Indeed, from a phenomenological point of view, we can observe that, while in some cases we have an objectifying consciousness of our bodies, in most circumstances we are aware of them in a "pre-reflective" way (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008) and the background feelings described by Damasio usually convey an implicit awareness of the body as an experiencing subject rather than as an observed object.

In Damasio's perspective, despite the fact that affective intentionality is misunderstood, emotions are correctly seen as the basis of a rapid and implicit acknowledgement of the vital significance of a variety of situations. However, although this idea constitutes a fundamental step towards the recognition of the cognitive value of emotions, if not integrated with the consideration of the different kinds of significance emotions make us aware of, it still generates an incomplete account of first-personal affective phenomena. Thanks to emotions such as awe and contempt, pride and shame, we experience a series of qualities which seem not to be reducible to the biological value of the objects at issue. Things are worthy of admiration or blame, anger or disappointment because of a set of features which are independent of the fact that the circumstance is beneficial or detrimental to the organic equilibrium. Through the variety of affective states we have thus the possibility to experience qualities, such as the moral and aesthetic ones, that cannot be identified with the biological impact of the situation. Although he differentiates between primary and secondary emotions, Damasio seems to ignore this distinction. In his opinion, secondary emotions distinguish themselves from primary emotions by virtue of the nature – learned and not genetically pre-determined – of their inducers and the role played by conscious thought in their formation. It seems to me, however, that this distinction regards only the different processes which give rise to emotions and not their qualitative/intentional difference[10].

[10] Since, from a phenomenological point of view, it is not possible to consider qualitative aspects of emotions as separate from their intentional character, I am using the expression "qualitative/intentional" with reference to feelings which are directed at specific aspects of self, others and the world.

Since the stimuli of secondary emotions acquire their function of inducers because of their being associated with the stimuli of primary emotions, there is no substantial difference between the two phenomena. Indeed, like primary emotional states, secondary emotions are determined by the vital value of particular circumstances, and the fact that they can be accompanied by a conscious cognitive evaluation doesn't change the evaluative dimension they refer to.
In my opinion, on the contrary, not only primary and secondary emotions differ from one another by virtue of their characteristic feeling (the "what it is like" of an emotion concerning the social world is not identical with the "what it is like" of non-social emotional reactions), but they are also directed at essentially different intentional objects[11].
Furthermore, as far as secondary emotions are concerned, Damasio conceives of evaluation and emotion as two distinct processes: evaluative beliefs and judgements can have emotional effects but they are different from the bodily modifications which constitute emotions. However, from a phenomenological perspective it is possible to claim that affective states are evaluative processes and emotion themselves should be seen as evaluations by means of which a direct perception of axiological properties takes place (De Monticelli 2003; Scheler 1916).

2.3. Passivity, responsibility and intersubjectivity

In Damasio's account, affects are considered as completely passive phenomena: being regarded as neurobiological processes, emotions and the relative feelings can only be viewed as involuntary, automatic phenomena which, once elicited, can hardly be controlled. However, also this idea can be questioned from a phenomenological point of view. Feelings do not seem to be absolutely passive: although they are not completely under voluntary control, it would be wrong to maintain that we do not have any role in their constitution. On the contrary, we can exert a great influence on the development of our emotional life, for example by concentrating our attention on some qualities rather than others or by establishing priority relations among our emotional concerns.
If affective states are not passively undergone and we can exert an active role in their constitution, then it is plausible that, at least to a certain extent, feelings could be educated, thus allowing us to respond to particular things, people and states of affairs with increasingly appropriate emotional reactions. In everyday life we can say for example that "we try to overcome fear" or that "we have learnt to

[11] Moreover, there is no substantial phenomenological evidence in support of the idea that secondary emotions can be considered as particular combinations of elements characteristic of primary emotions (such as peculiar facial expressions) and other distinct components. On the contrary, emotions manifest themselves as unitary phenomena which differ in virtue of their intentional objects and qualitative character and therefore, even though they could share some features with one another, emotions such as contempt and disgust, should be seen as essentially different phenomena.

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get indignant" at something and sometimes, as time passes by, we become able to react in a more moderate way to the events which used to be the origin of negative emotions. It is by virtue of the role we feel we play in our affective education that we tend to deem people as at least partially responsible for the feelings they have or haven't developed and from a phenomenological point of view, it is thus possible to maintain that affective sensitivity can be "extended" or "narrowed" (De Monticelli 2003). As observed by Goldie:

> *emotions can be educated; in bringing up a child we use the child's capability for emotional experience, and our own emotional responses, to educate him or her to recognize certain things as meriting a certain sort of emotional response. And, through this process of education, the child's responses can come to be both appropriate and proportionate (Goldie 2000, p. 48).*

Indeed, although some emotional reactions are completely involuntary, it is possible to take a position, even an affective one, towards our emotional responses, attributing or denying them a specific motivational role (Stein 1922). For example, when experiencing an emotion that we do not consider to be adequate, such as envy of a friend's success, we can prevent this state from provoking other negative emotions, trying to leave the affective "landscape" open to other positive emotions, such as joy or admiration for the friend's abilities. If emotional states were totally passive, there wouldn't be the possibility to go through this affective modulation and evolution. However, it is possible to claim that, in the cases described by Damasio, an affective development concerning secondary emotions can take place. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in his account, at the level under consideration, it is a particular cognitive process that determines a set of physiological reactions, while, along with De Monticelli (2003) I suggest that, from a phenomenological point of view, a specific affective, rather than cognitive, maturation takes place. Beside judgements, also emotions can become more appropriate, thus resulting in our being able to respond to aspects of reality which were previously neutral from the affective point of view or to experience more adequate emotional reactions. Finally, I would like to examine an aspect of Damasio's theory which I consider of a primary importance for the intersubjective status of emotions. By defining emotions as complex sets of bodily reactions to specific environmental or internal conditions, he argues that these states can be the object of experimental observation, that is they can be publicly examined and measured from a third-person perspective. Feelings, on the other hand, would consist in the subject's conscious perception of the emotion, namely a first-person experience which, in Damasio's opinion, is private and can be acknowledged only by the subject himself. Therefore, he maintains that only the bodily modifications that constitute the emotion are directly observable while the presence of feelings should be deduced from verbal reports and by means of analogies

with the observer's own experience. In his opinion, then, there would be a radical separation between what is public and accessible from a third-person perspective and what is private and accessible only from a first-person perspective.
The capacity to understand the experience of others, that is the capacity to attribute mental states, is a primary philosophical issue and the approach adopted by Damasio with reference to this point is still characterized by some "cartesian" elements. In his view (2000), indeed, we directly experience only the body of other people, namely the external manifestations and the bodily changes that can be scientifically investigated. The subjective component, the feeling itself, is completely hidden and its existence is to be inferred on the basis of some relevant circumstances. Therefore, although central to Damasio's position is the acknowledgment of the relation which exists between mental and bodily phenomena, as far as their manifestation is concerned, these phenomena are considered as radically separate[12].
I believe, however, that the author's account is once again implausible in light of the structure of our first-person experience. In interpersonal relations, indeed, we do not have an exclusively indirect access to the emotional states of other people: on the contrary, we are able to perceive them directly. As suggested by Scheler, we do not perceive the blushing of a face as a mere cutaneous reaction that only subsequently, thanks to the subject's reports and the comprehension of the circumstances, can be associated with a particular emotion. Rather, in the blushing we immediately perceive shame as in a particular grimace we can perceive anger. The felt emotion and its expression should thus be considered as a unitary phenomenon rather than two distinct elements (Buck 1993; Scheler 1923). Cheerfulness and sadness, anger and tenderness are manifested by characteristic gestures and expressions and these phenomena, rather than being mere signs or symptoms, are an integral part of the affective state itself[13]. Thanks to these gestures and expressions, we directly perceive others' emotional reactions, namely we have an immediate access to their lived experience. The radical separation between emotion and feeling, which mirrors the separation between behaviour and consciousness, seems then inappropriate to account for the structure of our interpersonal relations and gives rise to unconvincing explanations of how we become conscious of the mental states of others.

[12] "It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind [...]" (Damasio 2000, p. 36).
[13] This idea is not at odds with the acknowledgement of the importance of feelings in affective experience. As observed by Goldie: "One can easily allow the importance of feelings in emotion and emotional experience whilst at the same time responding to and defusing an unnecessary misunderstanding about the epistemology of others' emotions – a misunderstanding which, to summarize, goes something like this: an emotion *is* what one feels (false); only he can experience what he is feeling (true); so I cannot know what emotion he is feeling (false); all I can grasp are the expressions of the emotion he is feeling and these are only symptoms of the thing itself (false)" (Goldie 2000, pp. 184-185).

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