

Essay on Emotions

Final version

Aron Petau

967985

Philosophy for Cognitive Science (8.3405)

August 2021

1. *In what sense does the perspective on emotions developed by Griffiths and Scarantino (2008) differ from more traditional approaches?*
2. *What are the main arguments for the situated perspective on emotion?*

In chapter 23 on situated cognition, "Emotions in the Wild" (Griffiths and Scarantino, 2008) from the Book "The cambridge handbook of situated cognition", edited by (Robbins and Aydede, 2008), the authors argue in favor of a situated perspective, contrasted against more traditional accounts like neo-Jamesian approaches and cognitivism, as presented in Scarantino and de Sousa (2021). In my essay, I will examine the differences between the two perspectives and collect the arguments towards the application of the situated perspective.

Traditional approaches on emotion Two important traditional accounts of emotion are cognitivism and neo-Jamesianism, where emotions are seen as largely uncontrolled responses to the environment, where the environment presents stimuli and is subject to the response elicited. An emotion then, corresponds to certain

internal states and the emoting agent receives stimuli, these are processed and evaluated, and an action is generated. In this framework, emotions aid in the decision-making process by providing valence and import information regarding the objects in the surrounding environment. One influential claim from Nussbaum (2001) frames emotions as evaluative judgments, providing a basis and motivation for further action.

Situated perspective The situated perspective bears its essential feature in the name, it is sensitive to the situation of the emoting individual. The emotion here is viewed as goal-directed strategic interaction with the environment. This reframing of the emotion implies theoretical changes:

Difference A situated perspective views an emotion as a strategic device and lets it take an active, performative role, which, according to Griffiths and Scarantino (2008), is evident in anger as an example. Asking a neo-Jamesian what purpose anger serves, she would have to reply that it is a bodily reaction serving no purpose other than the metaphorical "letting off steam". A situationalist, seeing the emotion as a social signal has to concede that the emotion itself, or rather, its temporal unfolding is highly dependent on the social feedback and can show different "phenotypes"¹ of display, bodily states, and phenomenological experience. From here it is not much heavy lifting to say that an emotion that feels different could perhaps partially be a different emotion and serve different purposes. One notable example from Griffiths and Scarantino (2008) would be sulking, which seems irrational and unhelpful when thinking in terms of beliefs and desires. The moment we reframe sulking as strategic, as a signal to the other party that the emoter is dissatisfied and condemns the transaction, it is perfectly rational and likely an integral part of social hierarchical positioning.

Another fundamental difference in the perspectives is the theoretical dependence

¹taken from Griffiths and Scarantino (2008)

on conceptual thought. If emotion is an indicator of value, valence, and import of objects, it is (conceptually) located between the object and the emoter, expressing a stance, taking a term from Daniel Dennett. An emotion is a relation towards x , with x being a concept. It would be very hard to express our emotional relation to a nonconceptual object within the here-called traditional framework. A traditional account leaves room for valence towards objects, but in a unilateral, unchanging way. Once we acknowledge that the nature of the object is painted by our perspective, which in turn is painted by the object and its surrounding relations, judgements and evaluations lose their universality. A consequence of the parting opinions regarding the role of context is the universality of emotion. This is as if saying about rule-based formation laws of some form "if x then y ", that there cannot be a unified general x , I would have to form individual statements "if x_1 given that some context c , then y ". Since there is no sensible way for c to be bounded. A situationalist would then abandon the doomed project of trying to abstract the inabstractible and acknowledge the limitations of context sensitivity. As a consequence of a shift towards the transactional nature of emotions, they are also not necessarily intrapsychic. An emotion can now conceptually unfold between individuals, it can be interpersonal.

We also observe a shift in the sense of purpose of the emoter. An emotion, that was previously happening to me, evident in talking of "experiencing an emotion", is now a tool in my social arsenal that serves specialized purposes and can be employed strategically. Shifting from evaluative judgments (Nussbaum, 2001), which are a kind of decision-making that contains an evaluative process and ends with some appraisal, a situationalist can address long-lived emotional unfolding courses. Back to the example of anger, my anger can change in structure and scope not only upon forming new beliefs but especially upon evaluating social feedback.

Arguments for situated perspective The central argument speaking for a situated approach is context sensitivity. We get rid of the idea that a general universal-

ist call about emotional reactions can be made, we give up the potential predictive power. Recognizing that the environment (context) has a shaping role on the emotion throughout its life means that we will not be able to abstract away from specifics of the environment. As Griffiths and Scarantino (2008) argue, doing so still makes sense. Given the premise of situatedness, failing to take into account context would result in poor predictive and explanatory theoretical results. Any theory able to account for specific context effects will have increased power at least for explaining a single case. Therefore, it is simply a scientific imperative to explore also situated emotions. The different theoretical requirements for conceptual thought are a major advantage for the situated approach, emotional reasoning and strategizing can now also be expected from individuals lacking conceptual thought such as infants. Many previously unexplained phenomena are now explainable, one example being guilt or embarrassment experienced when in front of authorities. The presupposition that embarrassment is the result of some violation of a norm does not always hold and hence seems insufficient. A situationalist could remain agnostic regarding conceptual thought and only would have to presuppose some social transaction. Some inconsistencies that other approaches have are also prominently resolved here. One example is phobia, which can be identified by the emoter as irrational, but that does not necessarily reduce their effect. Neo-Jamesian would have to argue that phobias are created based on false beliefs, or representing self-deceit (Griffiths and Scarantino, 2008).

Dynamic coupling, the idea that the object of the emotion does not stay invariant throughout the course of the unfolding of the emotion, enables reciprocal causation where emotions and their displays can elicit other emotions. An emotion can now serve as the object of emotion, bringing into question the ontological place of emotion and enabling meta-considerations.

A situated approach will increase the explanatory power since it can account for things neglected in other theories. Another example would be the highly debated

higher cognitive emotions, which affective theories struggle to account for since they are clearly more than a reflex-like reaction to external stimuli and can have complex motivations. Not strictly an argument in favor of situated cognition but still necessary to include is the compatibility with other approaches. To take a situationalist stance explicitly does not invalidate affect- or belief-oriented approaches, it is rather a question of the type of things that one wishes to answer. In an image: it is just a question of scope and scale, whether I am interested in short-term affect-response or long-term strategizing.

The paper makes a strong argument for the compatibility and usefulness of a plethora of theories on emotion. As a conclusion, our ideas about what emotions are and what purposes they serve, we only gain by also considering the context. Situatedness does not have and cannot have the motivation to be a universalistic explanatory machine, rather, it takes us back to the individual level and can help tremendously when applied while thinking about people as one would in a case study. The authors also open up the question of whether it makes sense at all to think of emotions as a natural kind. It is well within the spirit of situatedness to argue that emotions might not be one abstractable class after all.

References

- Griffiths, P. and Scarantino, A. (2008). *Emotions in the Wild: The Situated Perspective on Emotion*, page 437–453. Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology. Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Robbins, P. and Aydede, M. (2008). *The Cambridge handbook of situated cognition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Scarantino, A. and de Sousa, R. (2021). Emotion. In Zalta, E. N., editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Summer 2021 edition.