



Beyond Appraisal: Strengthening Colombetti's Enactive Approach to Emotion

[FI224LM]

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I. Introduction

In exploring human emotions, traditional models have primarily emphasized cognitive processes – appraisals – as essential to the emergence of emotional states. These models often portray bodily responses as secondary to, or even merely reflective of, cognitive evaluations. However, this conceptual separation between mind and body has been increasingly challenged. One prominent critique is Giovanna Colombetti's enactive approach, which merges bodily and cognitive processes into a unified, dynamic framework. This essay aims to expand and strengthen Colombetti's arguments, illustrating why traditional models struggle to fully account for the complexities of emotional experience. Through this examination, I aim to show how Colombetti's enactive approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of emotions as deeply embodied phenomena, often bypassing or complicating the need for conscious cognitive appraisal.

II. Traditional theories

In this section I will outline the three traditional theories of emotions that Colombetti explores (Colombetti, 2007).

The first account suggests that the body plays an indirect role in emotions by requiring cognitive interpretation to produce specific emotional experiences. In this view, bodily arousal is seen as undifferentiated and affectively neutral; it does not directly carry any emotional meaning. Instead, it requires interpretation or "labelling" based on the context to acquire emotional specificity. For example, Schachter and Singer (1962) proposed that arousal must be interpreted by the individual based on environmental cues to be transformed into a specific emotion. This model emphasizes that arousal alone is not enough to produce a specific emotional experience; instead, it must be cognitively attributed to a particular cause.

In the second account, bodily responses are seen as outcomes or "byproducts" of cognitive appraisal processes. This perspective argues that bodily reactions do not contribute causally to the emotion itself; they are merely the effects of prior cognitive evaluations. For example, Lyons's "causal-evaluative theory" (1980) posits that a sequence of mental evaluations (such as beliefs and desires) ultimately leads to physiological changes and behaviours. According to this account, the bodily response occurs only after an evaluation has been made and does not influence the appraisal process itself. Thus, the body has a passive role, only reflecting the results of cognitive processes.

Lazarus's (1966) (1991) view places cognitive appraisal as central to emotion, where bodily responses are secondary effects rather than active components. In his model, appraisal alone can elicit emotions, with *primary appraisal* assessing if situations align with one's goals and *secondary appraisal* considering coping options. While bodily changes follow appraisal, they don't influence the appraisal process itself, positioning the body as an indirect participant in emotional experiences. Lazarus's view is considered a "hybrid" because, while it aligns with the Lyons's account in treating bodily responses as outcomes of appraisal, it also adds a unique layer by allowing these bodily responses to be re-evaluated as the emotion unfolds as in Schachter and Singer's account. This reappraisal process means that the body, although secondary, can influence the ongoing emotional experience indirectly by providing new information for appraisal.

The third account views appraisal and bodily processes as interacting but still operating as separate subsystems. This modular view suggests that appraisal influences bodily responses and vice versa, but each remains distinct within its own "module." For instance, Scherer's (2000) (1984) "component process model" treats emotion as a system of multiple interacting subsystems—cognitive appraisal, autonomic nervous responses, motivation, and motor expressions. Each subsystem operates independently but can influence others. This model acknowledges that arousal can affect evaluations and vice versa, yet maintains the distinct roles of each subsystem within the emotional process

III. Limitations – Explaining Emotion in Everyday Life

In Colombetti's critique of traditional appraisal theories, her arguments could be strengthened by emphasizing how certain emotional experiences challenge the notion that appraisal must precede emotion or that emotions necessarily result from deliberate evaluation of the environment. Three examples illustrate instances where the traditional theories of appraisal – such as those of Lazarus, Lyons, and Schachter and Singer – fail to account for the complexities of emotional experiences.

One compelling example that challenges the traditional requirement of appraisal before emotion is the common experience of feeling an emotion without knowing exactly what it is or why it's occurring. This scenario contradicts the core of Lazarus's and Lyons's theories,

which posit that appraisal, a conscious or unconscious evaluative process, is necessary for emotions to arise. According to Lazarus, appraisal involves a sequence of primary and secondary assessments, where individuals determine the significance of an event for their well-being and assess their resources to manage it. However, people often feel emotions in ambiguous forms that resist immediate labelling or understanding, illustrating how emotions can be experienced as opaque rather than the product of deliberate appraisal. For instance, guilt often manifests subtly, masked by overcompensating behaviours such as excessive helpfulness or appeasement. A person might feel a deep, uneasy sensation but be unable to pinpoint its source, only realizing later upon reflection that they were compensating for a feeling of guilt they hadn't fully acknowledged. This example complicates Schachter and Singer's claim that emotional specificity requires arousal paired with an appraisal of environmental cues, as people sometimes feel specific emotions like guilt without initial conscious understanding of what triggered them. The emotional experience thus demonstrates that emotions are sometimes felt without a straightforward cognitive appraisal, undermining the traditional view that appraisal is a prerequisite for emotions.

Colombetti also had an argument to challenge Schachter and Singer's theory. In her example, she describes a situation in which she feels groggy, low-energy, and somewhat melancholic without immediately knowing why. After some reflection, she considers that these feelings might be due to abruptly stopping her coffee intake. Although she has not consciously appraised her mood in detail or attributed it to any clear event or thought, her body seems to be responding with certain emotional and physical sensations associated with her lack of energy and sense of unease. She eventually attributes these feelings to coffee withdrawal, but the emotional experience itself occurs prior to this realization. This example clearly shows that people are able to identify their emotions without knowing their cause which counters Schachter and Singer's claim that bodily events are neutral until their causes are known. My arguments adds that it is also possible for one to feel *some* emotion, without being able to identify that emotion, let alone identifying its cause.

Another challenge to traditional appraisal theories arises in cases where individuals expect to feel a certain emotion after appraising a situation but are surprised by an absence of emotion or a feeling contrary to expectation. Lyons's causal-evaluative theory assumes that appraisal produces predictable emotional outcomes because bodily reactions follow cognitive evaluations of the environment's significance. However, people may experience situations

where appraisal does not reliably lead to the anticipated emotion. Grief, for example, is a complex emotional response expected after significant loss, but many people feel surprised when they don't experience grief after a loss that logically warrants it. Someone might intellectually understand the gravity of losing a close relationship or family member yet feel numb or indifferent. Alternatively, after a breakup, a person may expect sadness and even prepare for it through reflection, only to feel relief instead. This discrepancy suggests that emotional responses are not always aligned with appraised significance or cognitive expectations. Lazarus's theory, which positions appraisal as the definitive determinant of emotional experience, fails to account for these emotionally mismatched situations. These examples reveal that emotions are not merely direct responses to appraised significance but can be absent or contrary to cognitive expectations, suggesting a more complex relationship between emotion and appraisal than traditional theories allow.

Furthermore, emotions can arise instantaneously upon perception without appraisal, suggesting that some emotions bypass cognitive evaluation entirely. Traditional theories such as Lazarus's propose that emotions are generated through a structured appraisal process, where individuals assess an event's relevance and implications before experiencing emotion. However, in moments of sudden fear or embarrassment, emotions can emerge so quickly that no reflective appraisal seems to occur. Imagine walking in a dimly lit environment and suddenly glimpsing what appears to be a threatening figure – fear surges instantly, preceding any cognitive evaluation of whether the figure is genuinely dangerous. This immediate response indicates that emotions like fear can emerge in response to stimuli without conscious appraisal, directly contradicting the traditional notion that cognition must precede emotion. Another example is a sudden feeling of shame that surfaces when someone in a conversation does not respond as expected; an immediate emotional response of self-consciousness or embarrassment arises before the person even reflects on the interaction's significance. These instances highlight that certain emotions are embodied reactions to perceived changes, not products of appraisal, challenging the traditional view that cognitive interpretation is required to generate emotions.

IV. Colombetti's Enactive Approach: Embodied Emotion Beyond Appraisal

Giovanna Colombetti builds on Marc Lewis's (2005) (2000) dynamic systems model of emotion, where appraisal and emotion form what Lewis calls an "appraisal-emotion amalgam." In this framework, appraisal and emotion become so intertwined that it is impossible to fully

separate cognitive evaluations from emotional responses. Lewis suggests that emotion and appraisal function as mutually constraining processes, with physiological arousal, feelings, perception, and action dynamically interacting. While Lewis's model proposes a significant integration between appraisal and emotion, it still treats them as somewhat distinct systems that converge but retain separate roles within emotional experience.

Colombetti takes this integration further through her "enactive" approach, a concept that redefines cognition, perception, and emotion as embodied processes intrinsically tied to bodily engagement with the world. While Lewis frames emotion and appraisal as linked yet distinct functions, Colombetti argues that appraisal is not only shaped by bodily processes but fundamentally constituted by them. For her, appraisal is not an abstract cognitive process that monitors bodily states from a detached position; instead, it is a dynamic, embodied experience directly informed by bodily arousal, actions, and environmental interactions. Appraisal and emotion thus lose their "vertical modularity" – the idea that they are distinct and only incidentally influence each other. Instead, they merge as co-constitutive processes that emerge from the body's sensorimotor interactions and self-regulation within an environment.

By emphasizing the inseparability of cognitive appraisal and bodily processes, Colombetti's enactive approach introduces an embodied perspective on emotion that reflects phenomenological insights into the lived experience of emotions. Rather than seeing the body as a passive recipient of appraisal processes, her theory views the body as actively shaping and generating appraisal through what she calls "constitutive interdependence." This concept, adapted from philosopher Susan Hurley, suggests that bodily actions and emotions are not merely linked; they are intertwined in such a way that they define each other. In this framework, emotional understanding emerges not from interpreting bodily states as if they were signals, but from the embodied experience itself – the way the body engages with its environment, experiences arousal, and generates action tendencies.

This enactive perspective allows Colombetti to advance Lewis's theory by eliminating the cognitive/emotional divide altogether, suggesting that emotion, appraisal, and bodily experience are fundamentally aspects of a single, unified process. Her theory highlights that emotional experiences are "enacted" through active bodily participation, not through abstract cognitive mechanisms. As a result, Colombetti's enactive appraisal provides a holistic model of emotion that brings traditional appraisal theory closer to a phenomenologically grounded, embodied view.

With this in mind, the examples from above demonstrate how the enactive perspective provides a more nuanced account of emotions as lived, bodily experiences that are not always preceded by or aligned with appraisal. In Colombetti's enactive approach, emotions are not merely cognitive interpretations of events but embodied reactions that often precede and shape cognitive interpretation. This approach better accommodates the fluid, sometimes opaque, and immediate nature of emotional experiences.

V. Why the Enactive Approach Offers a More Comprehensive Framework than dynamical systems

Lewis's theory of emotion, with its notion of an "appraisal-emotion amalgam," argues that appraisal and emotion are deeply interconnected, forming a dynamic system that blurs traditional boundaries between cognitive and affective processes. This model views appraisal as the interpretive assessment of "what" a situation is, while emotion responds with the "what to do about it." Despite its sophistication, Lewis's framework still conceptualizes appraisal and emotion as distinct components with overlapping but not entirely integrated functions. This distinction limits the theory's ability to account for certain emotional phenomena that resist such compartmentalization and instead require a fully enactive, embodied perspective.

For example, consider situations in which individuals experience emotion without clear appraisal. Lewis's model, while emphasizing feedback between appraisal and bodily arousal, still presumes that appraisal must occur for emotion to be identified and made intelligible. However, emotions often emerge without explicit appraisal or conscious awareness, challenging this structure. Imagine feeling a vague sense of unease in a crowded room without being able to identify its source or the nature of the emotion itself. According to Lewis's view, such emotions would be difficult to classify, as they lack a clear appraisal to structure them. In contrast, the enactive approach posits that bodily sensations and actions can themselves constitute the emotional experience, allowing emotion to be experienced directly, without explicit cognitive labelling.

Another limitation of Lewis's model is evident in cases where individuals anticipate specific emotions based on appraisal but find themselves feeling unexpectedly indifferent or even contrary emotions. For instance, someone may logically appraise a personal loss as warranting

grief, yet, upon reflection, feel relief or even emptiness. Lewis's framework suggests that appraisal would naturally guide emotional arousal in line with that evaluation, but emotional experiences often diverge from these anticipations. Colombetti's enactive model provides an alternative explanation: it suggests that emotions are not solely the outcome of cognitive appraisals but arise through dynamic, embodied interactions. This means that grief or relief can emerge not because of a particular appraisal, but through the body's lived, relational response to loss—an interpretation that emphasizes bodily presence and interactivity over evaluative judgments alone.

Furthermore, certain emotions arise almost instantaneously in reaction to stimuli, bypassing cognitive evaluation altogether. A classic example is the flash of fear experienced upon spotting a shadow that resembles a threat as mentioned earlier. This reaction happens so quickly that it precedes any conscious appraisal. In Lewis's framework, such immediate reactions remain somewhat unexplained, as appraisal should theoretically orient the emotional response. Colombetti's enactive approach, however, allows that perception itself can be affective and directly tied to bodily readiness, making the reaction an embodied appraisal rather than a cognitive one. Thus, fear arises as a direct bodily response to a perceived threat, supporting the notion that perception and bodily response can constitute the emotion without distinct cognitive appraisal.

These examples reveal that Lewis's model, while innovative, remains tethered to a cognitive interpretation of appraisal. By contrast, Colombetti's enactive approach better captures the embodied, immediate, and sometimes unarticulated nature of emotional experience, framing emotion as an interaction between body and world rather than as a product of cognitive assessment.

VI. Conclusion

Colombetti's enactive model fundamentally redefines how we understand emotional experience, integrating bodily and cognitive processes into a single, co-constitutive framework. This approach challenges traditional appraisal models by illustrating that emotions can arise without clear cognitive evaluation and often defy rational expectations. Through examples of ambiguous and immediate emotions, Colombetti's enactive perspective reveals the limitations of traditional models that compartmentalize mind and body. By grounding emotional experience in bodily engagement with the environment, her approach provides a more

comprehensive framework that better captures the complexity, fluidity, and embodied nature of emotions, offering a richer understanding of what it means to feel.

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