Towards a Cognitive Theory of Emotions

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A theory is proposed that emotions are cognitively based states which co-ordinate quasi-autonomous processes in the nervous system. Emotions provide a biological solution to certain problems of transition between plans, in systems with multiple goals. Their function is to accomplish and maintain these transitions, and to communicate them to ourselves and others. Transitions occur at significant junctures of plans when the evaluation of success in a plan changes. Complex emotions are derived from a small number of basic emotions and arise at junctures of social plans.

INTRODUCTION

In the first study of emotions to be based on the theory of evolution, Darwin (1872) concluded that emotional expressions are a kind of neural accident. They result from overflows of neural excitation which may serve no function in the actions of adults. Had he lived later, Darwin might have used as an example of this superfluity the facial expressions that people make when speaking on the telephone. His theory was that emotional expressions are vestiges of evolutionary history or of childhood habit.

This idea that major aspects of emotions are not functional has been taken up by later writers, who include Dewey (1895) in his attempt to reconcile Darwin's work with James' (1890). He proposed that emotions are disturbances which occur when habits are no longer useful in present contexts.