

THE MYSTERY OF EMOTIONS

Seeking a Theory of
What We Feel

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About the author

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PROLOGUE

A happy little girl

I start with a memory which has taken many years to germinate, and which initiated this quest to understand how much we are rooted in the experience of our feelings. People having their feelings know exactly what they are talking about—from the inside. Speaking of affects of the deepest personal kind means we must reach inside ourselves in order to express them. And yet they are not obscure even for the youngest, who speak eloquently and often without words through their crying, smiling, etc.

Many years ago, a father wondered how his little girl could begin to identify her own feelings.

A little girl and a small incident

My recollections:

One of my children around the end of her second year came walking through the kitchen at breakfast time with a breezy air and announced, “I feel happy.” I was struck by a child so young having words for feelings. She was at the beginning of learning

language, and yet she was already applying it to her feelings, as well as to the world around. It was not, I believe, a copied phrase from a saying or an expression regularly used by her mother or myself. It seemed a genuine statement. And if it was, that would presuppose that she had a state of mind which she could identify as one which other people call “happy”. I wondered if it may have referred to any state of mind randomly; well, perhaps it did, but I had some confidence from her demeanour that she was probably having a genuine feeling, of happiness, at that moment.

For a number of decades now, I have had this incident in mind. Such a young child, who was occupied with that emotional world inside her, had a familiarity with the way one announces such things to others. Language is learned during the second year of life, so she was able to form the representation linguistically, not just to recognise her perceptions. She could clearly enquire about her world, and that included the representation of the inner emotional world. And she could represent it to others in her external world.

Hence, I came to reflect on what must be involved in this kind of statement. Providing it was exactly as my little girl said, there must have been a sense of some state of being which she felt herself to be in, and in addition she must have had some awareness of others being in a state she could believe to be comparable and that they had a word for it and could therefore understand it in themselves. And on top of that, she must have observed that other people’s states are often referred to as of interest to others.

If it were that someone in her world—mother, or other caregiver—had identified the girl’s state of mind and had given it a name, it was still a state that the little girl could recognise as one that other people recognised.

This was a move beyond the purely imitative facial expressions and auditory sounds which younger infants, from a few weeks, can recognise in mother’s face and can attempt to imitate (Murray & Trevarthen, 1985). In the very young imitative example, a link is made between visual perception and attempts at muscular co-ordination of the face (and, maybe, hands and body) to imitate. This is similar to, and often co-ordinated with, auditory imitation. There is a difference, however,

with the example of my little girl. The link is between an inner state within the girl and a *verbal* representation of her inner state. This is not a physical/bodily imitation, but a representation of something personal, and is felt to be internal, which is then communicated externally. There is a major shift of linkage and intention between two months and two years. It may connect with Vygotsky's notion (1962) of the interchange between inner speech and external communication.

Despite psychoanalysts lacking a theory of affects, here is a two-year-old who had herself a rudimentary theory. The state of mind which she could identify as "happy" could clearly be identified as different from some other states of mind; she also noted it was a state of mind adhering to an "I" which she clearly thought of as herself. She could represent her state of mind in words to herself, and to her Daddy and Mummy who were present and listening. She was not, at that moment, representing perceptions of the external world. She represented to us some inner features of her own mind. There are certainly aspects of a theory of affects here in this little girl, who did not at that time show other signs of being especially precocious.

At the age of two, we can say, on this admittedly slim evidence, there is a recognition of a self that can feel and identify at least one affect. As Piaget (1929) noted, this age (the beginning of the pre-operational stage) is the point at which language is being learned, and there is already a capacity to represent the world. In this instance, it is the *internal* world that is being represented. And it is a world of affects not directly of objects. And she represented them in abstract symbols, words, and not just as bodily behaviour. This verbal representation of internal feeling states starts as early as the verbal representation of the external world—that fact, my two-year-old showed me. It might be even more fascinating to consider preverbal representations of feelings—but that can only be guessed at, perhaps.

The upshot of this formative moment for this book was for me to consider how to take further the issues raised in this serendipitous occurrence.