

“WHAT IS AN EMOTION?”

By EDMUND GURNEY.

Professor James's recent discussion of this question (MIND XXXIV.) was from any point of view most excellent reading. If it were possible to regard a paper so full of true observation otherwise than as an admirable piece of serious work, it would still be open to one to applaud it as an extremely good joke. Not that I should be inclined to join issue with the writer at the point where he himself presents his doctrine in a humorous light. I am able, or all but able, to swallow the statement that, when I meet a bear, I feel afraid because I tremble, instead of trembling because I feel afraid—that I am angry because I strike a rival, instead of striking him because I am angry; and Prof. James has certainly brought out with characteristic clearness and picturesqueness the very large part which the bodily sensations of the skin, the muscles, and the viscera, may play in what we call emotion. But it is hard to follow his argument that *all* emotion may be resolved into such sensations without a feeling of amused resistance; and if one seeks some immediate justification for this feeling, his own crowning case may surely save one all trouble. There we find a lady, who was suffering from extraordinary loss of sensibility over the whole surface of the body, quoted as a crucial instance of concurrent *emotional insensibility*, because she had lost delight in her ordinary occupations and in her family affections. Yet, reading her own words, we discover that she was all the time a prey to *emotion of the most poignant kind*, and spent her life in agonised rebellion against its strange conditions.

This, however, is beginning at the end. Let us first glance at the emotions to which Prof. James's theory may seem completely, or almost completely, to apply. It is not hard to see what they are; and the ground of their peculiarity is practically supplied by Prof. James himself. *Fear* and *rage* are perhaps the most prominent examples. In such cases, the relation of the organism to some particular feature of the physical environment, which evokes the passion, is exceptionally close and direct; and it is inevitable that the mere sense of the bodily reaction should make up a large portion of all that is felt. The civilised man is here within a measurable distance of the lowlier creatures whose tissues contract at the touch or approach of an alien body; where if we can conceive any true *psychical* reaction to take place, the *sense of contracting* would undoubtedly hold a large place in it. And more refined emotions, which we should not describe in terms of fear or rage, may still present obvious relationships to those cruder and more primitive forms. Our sense of “all-overishness” when our friend approaches the edge of a precipice, is clearly only a step or two removed from the apprehension or the

actual representation of a fall ; our repulsion to snakes is closely allied to our instinct of anger at the attack of an insidious foe. In the sense of *shame*, again, the physical factor, if less completely explicable, is not less prominent, and clearly stands in specific relation to the feature of the environment on which Prof. James has done well to insist—namely, other human beings and their attitude towards us. Even in *melancholy* of the helpless and moping sort, one may fully admit the sense of the limp and flexed position as a real factor in the emotion ; and one may account for this bodily factor in the same way as in the more definite cases of fear and rage,—regarding the posture as the natural bodily response, not now to some single or sudden feature of the environment, but to any hard and overmastering conditions against which it seems vain to contend.

But as soon as we advance to cases where the close and assignable relation to the environment ceases, the difficulties of the theory begin. To take one of Prof. James's own instances—“ When worried by any slight trouble, one may find that the focus of one's bodily consciousness is the contraction, often quite inconsiderable, of the eyes and brows ”. Now Prof. James treats such an item merely as “ giving accent ” to a large “ complex of sensibility,” diffused through “ our whole cubic capacity ”. This is, of course, a convenient description for his purpose ; but it is surely not too much to say that any feature of the bodily state which one can thus localise and bring into prominence must be the preponderating factor of the state, must characterise it so far as it has any individual character—at any rate in cases where the deviation from the normal state in the way of *diffused* comfort or discomfort is too slight for one to be certain even of its existence. In such a case, if our whole bodily sounding-board is reverberating in any way different from that in which it was reverberating before the worry arose, its modulations have been too much muffled to be properly audible—while in the sense of contraction of the brow we do at least catch the sound of a distinct new note. But if this be so, then this sense of contraction must be that wherein this psychic condition differs emotionally from the previous one—*i.e.*, must be, according to Prof. James, the emotion of the worry ; which at that rate ought to be producible by a good rub with an astringent lotion.

But perhaps the clearer limit, beyond which (as it seems to me) Prof. James's theory cannot be pressed, is at the point where *all* local and definable “ expression ” or “ manifestation ” vanishes, and where, if a wave of bodily disturbance passes, it is *as such* below the level of definite consciousness. Prof. James of course admits the existence of this point ; and below it he has to make up his several emotions from hypothetical permutations and combinations of extremely obscure bodily symptoms, such as slight variations in the circulating and secreting organs, and slight alterations of muscular tension. Now for emotions which are on

the same side of the neutral region that divides the pleasant from the unpleasant, and which are not connected with definable peculiarities of the general bodily state, (this remaining at the same level of slight exhilaration or slight depression for a considerable variety of them), it is surely hard to attribute distinct qualitative differences to varieties of combination of factors that remain in the dimmest background of consciousness. In trying to imagine such a result, I seem to be trying to coin gold by shuffling counters in the dark, or to produce red, blue, and green from different combinations of white, light buff, and light grey. I am quite prepared to admit that emotions do truly differ in quality much less than is often supposed, and very much less than their conditions. For aught I know, the “sudden glory” of a good joke may be, emotionally, very like indeed to the sudden glory of appointment to some lucrative office; and I think that this view, of the essential similarity of emotions which would be popularly accounted very different, derives valuable support from Prof. James’s demonstrations of the large sensory element in emotion. The view seems specially applicable to cases where there is a marked tendency to bodily expression—such as slapping of the thigh or sudden extension of the limbs or trunk—and where therefore the sense of this expression, similarly evoked by various conditions, really is (as I should willingly concede) an important factor of the whole psychical state. But in quieter cases where the emotions have no distinct common factor of this sort, their identity is far more disputable. I cannot get rid of my conviction that, *e.g.*, the emotion of quiet amusement is qualitatively different from the emotion produced by bright and cheerful music. The former of these emotions, by the way, is one which Prof. James has not noticed. He seems to identify amusement with a tendency to laugh; and he asks what the sense of amusement amounts to when the impulse to laugh is abstracted—representing this abstraction as a purely speculative process, which in no way implies that the laugh, or the impulse to laugh, can be practically absent. I think I catch his meaning; but my experience is that the impulse to laugh *is* practically absent, even in presence of the most amusing things. I have never been more profoundly amused than by Jefferson in the second act of “Rip Van Winkle”; but except at one or two points it never occurred to me to laugh. Nor do I think that I was exceptional: I never saw anything like a display of mirth at that act; yet of a large portion of the audience it would surely be true that a “screaming farce” would have *amused* them less. There are passages in “Happy Thoughts” of which the physical effect on most readers is to make them hot all over; but will any one deny that these passages are *amusing*, and to that extent delightful? But to return to my point—the emotion produced in me by Rip’s interview with the goblins is, as far as I can discover, qualitatively different from that produced by the overture

to "Zampa"; while the *bodily* reactions—the effects on the skin, muscles, and viscera—so far as they enter into the field of consciousness, must, I am persuaded, be very nearly the same. The chief features in them are probably a faint glow and, as Prof. James has so rightly emphasised, a faint tension of the extensor muscles. And in either case to represent the distinct and keenly-felt emotion (even if I could believe the emotions to be one and not two) as *consisting* in these dimly suffusive feelings, seems to me decidedly less reasonable than for instance to identify the emotion with the sense of some distinct and localised movement, such as tapping time with one's foot.

But the argument for limiting the application of Prof. James's theory becomes surely far stronger still in the case of more durable and pervading emotions; because these will survive unchanged through many distinct variations of bodily state, some of which may be quite incompatible with the special sort of physical response associated with the emotion as its natural or conventional "expression". Prof. James represents *rage* as incompatible with "limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face". But surely the emotion of *hatred* may be felt by a man who is resting quietly in an armchair after a hard day's work. Iago did not go about habitually with a flushed face, dilated nostrils, and clenched teeth. But a better example, perhaps, is *grief*. Grant that the emotion of suddenly hearing of a bereavement is in large measure impregnated with bodily elements, such as quickening of the heart and catching of the breath. I am not sure that these are not often the most prominent symptoms of the sudden hearing of good news as well as bad; but let that pass. Would Prof. James deny the name of emotion to the sense of desolation and loss which clouds many a successive day, perhaps for years afterwards, and which is perfectly compatible with the ordinary vital functioning, and even with active bodily exercise?¹ Here the dim reverberations from the whole bodily sounding-board, even if one could suppose them to be permanently going on, must surely be swamped in the general stir of the more normal existence. "What would grief be," asks Prof. James, "without its sobs, its suffocation of the heart, its pang in the breast-bone?" It would be what for the most part it is, an emotion of desire and regret. It must surely be a paradox to

¹ Cases may surely be imagined where certain features of the physical state are sufficiently marked to put it beyond doubt that the whole condition—*quâd* physical—derives its character from them; e.g., where a healthy man is taking a brisk walk on a bracing day. The preponderating sense of bodily vigour may be the same to-day, when he is walking to a death-bed, as yesterday, when he was walking to an agreeable party; but will the two walks impress him as emotionally identical? A still clearer example would perhaps be where the physical condition in the two cases is one of *discomfort*—as where the man is obliged to *run* rather faster and more continuously than is convenient. Happiness will triumph over even a stitch in the side.

say that this brooding mass of emotion, whenever it makes its darkening presence felt, induces the bodily conditions associated with the first shock of sorrow; and equally so to maintain that in such a case the image in the mind is a representation of those bodily conditions, and not of the actual loss sustained. The utmost that I could here concede to Prof. James would be that at the times when the emotion is *most distinctive*—times of solitude, for instance—there may now and again be faint initiations of “expression,” which help to characterise the whole psychic state; and that when these particular contributions fail—as when the mourner is engaged in ordinary talk or in some other occupation which precludes them—the emotion to some extent loses colour and becomes a vaguer sort of misery. But if—as is surely indisputable—its *mass*, and its character *quod painful*, remain unaffected under these latter conditions, it is just as truly *emotion* as before, and emotion to which the physical signs—so far from constituting it—do not now even contribute.

But the difficulties naturally culminate when we pass on to “the moral, intellectual, and æsthetic feelings”. Against the view that “concordances of sounds, of colours, of lines, logical consistencies, teleological fitnesses, affect us with a pleasure that seems ingrained in the very form of the representation itself,” Prof. James maintains that “unless there actually be coupled with the intellectual feeling a bodily reverberation of some kind,—unless we actually laugh at the neatness of the mechanical device, thrill at the justice of the act, or tingle at the perfection of the musical form—our mental condition is more allied to a judgment of *right* than to anything else”. He proceeds to draw a clear distinction between cognition and emotion, and illustrates it in a striking way by the coldly critical view of a connoisseur, and the naïve thrills of a layman, in presence of a work of art. Even here I should be glad to know if he really thinks that Titian or Mr. Ruskin have derived less *emotion* from the “Assumption” than the honest English couple whose attitude he so amusingly describes. But one may surely recognise the difference between the judgment of rightness and the emotion of æsthetic pleasure (whether true or false, healthy or morbid), without having to concede that the latter is a mere wave of diffused sensory disturbance. There can be no better illustration of the issue before us than is afforded by one of Prof. James’s own examples—that of music. His view goes far to confound the two things which, in my opinion, it is the prime necessity of musical psychology to distinguish—the effect, chiefly sensuous, of mere streams or masses of finely-coloured sound, and the distinctive musical emotion to which the *form* of a sequence of sound, its melodic and harmonic individuality, even realised in complete silence, is the vital and essential object. It is with the former of these two very different things that the physical reactions—the stirring of the hair, the tingling and the shiver—

are far most markedly connected. Such effects no doubt often accompany the genuinely musical hearing of music—the mode of hearing which instinctively takes account of the form ; but rarely, I think *in dissociation* from mass and colour of a satisfactory sort. If I may speak of myself, there is plenty of music from which I have received as much emotion in silent representation as when presented by the finest orchestra ; but it is with the latter condition that I almost exclusively associate the cutaneous tingling and hair-stirring. But to call my enjoyment of the *form*, of the *note-after-noteness*, of a favourite melody a mere critical "judgment of right," would really be to deny me the power of expressing a fact of simple and intimate experience in English. It is quintessentially emotion—whether due to mere "cerebral forms of pleasure and displeasure," or connected with remote associational sources, I need not here discuss. Now there are hundreds of other bits of music, similar to these in all external ways—in all points that are verbally definable—which I judge to be *right* without receiving an iota of the emotion. For purposes of emotion, they are to me like geometrical demonstrations, or like acts of integrity performed in Peru. I think that Prof. James is bound to accept my experience as I have stated it ; but then he will have to answer me this. If the cerebral centre or centres which are primarily affected merely give the sense of *rightness*, and the secondary reverberation from the muscles, skin, and viscera superadds the *emotion*, why does one *rightness* evoke the reverberation, and not the other ? I only know that the two bits of musical movement differ qualitatively by the presence to one, and the absence from the other, of an emotional power : why should my brain-centres know better than I, and send down a summons to my body to reverberate when Beethoven is "right," and not when Clementi is "right" ? So when Prof. James says that "in every art there is the keen perception of certain relations being *right* or not, and there is the emotional flush and thrill consequent thereupon ; and these are two things, not one," I reply that though logically they may be two, experientially they are often one. To the example which I have chosen the doctrine would indeed hardly apply even logically. For the emotion which the musical layman receives is not "consequent" upon the perception of any relations which can be marked out and justified as right apart from emotion ; that sort of *rightness* is *caviare* to him. But the veriest layman may maintain that, in writing a movement of a sonata, it is more *right* to produce a musical organism than a musical corpse ; and when the two movements are produced, *emotion* is the only test for deciding which of them is alive and which dead.

But I am outrunning my space. I will only suggest, in conclusion, that if the above argument is valid in the case of anything with so large an element of sense in it as music, it must surely apply *a fortiori* to moral and intellectual fitnesses.