

CHASING THE BEAR: WILLIAM JAMES ON SENSATIONS, EMOTIONS AND INSTINCTS

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ABSTRACT

William James's account of emotions is frequently categorised as a feeling theory of emotions. Consideration of James's views about sensations, however, reveals that this categorisation is untenable. Instead, many of James's emotions are more appropriately categorised as instincts. The categorisation of emotions as instincts entails that emotions do have a function – contrary to a criticism often levied against James's account.

I. INTRODUCTION

William James's account of emotions has now largely fallen out of vogue. As Barbalet (1999) notes, James's account is rarely discussed anymore – and when it *is* discussed, it is usually invoked only to be dismissed or ridiculed. Golightly's view can be taken as an exemplar of this trend, in noting that “the argument is practically over; [James's] theory generally has been abandoned” (Golightly, 1953, 287; see also Feinstein, 1970). Where the attitude towards James's account *is* more charitable, it is valued only insofar as it marks a starting off point for emotion-research– nearly all texts on emotions published in the past 100 years begin with a discussion of the James-Lange theory (Lang, 1994).¹

The fortunes of James's theory of emotions seem to be somewhat improving of late, however, as several recent articles – largely by psychologists – have defended the

continuing relevance of James's account. Ellsworth (1994), for example, argues that James's work anticipates many of the current questions and ideas in emotion research, and more recently, Palencik (2007) defends the view that several of James's ideas are indispensable to the contemporary study of emotion.² Barbalet (1999) defends a narrower version of this claim, arguing that James's account is of particular importance to the social psychology of emotions. On the empirical side, Laird and Bressler (1990) argue that much contemporary research supports James's theory.

While at least some scholars thus seem to be amenable to the idea of reconsidering the merit of James's account of emotions, the philosophers of emotions, for the most part, continue to treat it like the ugly duckling of emotion theories. This is because they generally categorise James's account of emotions as a feeling theory,³ which emphasises 'the actual feel' of an emotion – the physiological changes and disturbances we feel when we are angry, for example (Calhoun and Solomon, 1984). That is, feeling theories of emotions assimilate emotions to bodily sensations (Deigh, 1994).

While a 'feeling theory' label sounds *prima facie* innocuous, this label is the last nail in the coffin of a theory so labelled, since feeling theories of emotions are viewed as unable to adequately capture a key property of emotions – their intentionality (Hatzimoysis, 2003). Although 'intentionality' is a notoriously slippery concept, it is usually described as the property of being about, for, of, at or towards someone or something (Deigh, 1994; Solomon, 1993). Mental states such as beliefs are paradigmatically intentional; it seems, however, that emotions, too, are intentional. One's anger, for example, is generally directed *at* someone or something – the unruly child who relentlessly kicks one's seat on a 14 hour flight, say. Sensations, on the other hand, are not thought to be intentional in this way. In labelling William James's theory of emotions a feeling theory, philosophers thus ascribe to him the view that emotions are intentionality-less sensations, and consequently consign his account to the dustbin of intellectual history, along with the four humours and the like.⁴

I think, however, that ascribing to James the view that emotions are sensations – and labelling James's account a feeling theory – rests on a misunderstanding of James's views. Instead, I will argue, many of James's emotions are more accurately categorised as instincts. This classification, moreover, entails that emotions *do* have a function, contrary

to a criticism frequently levied against James's account. To this end, I will proceed in the following manner. In section 2, I will offer a brief exegesis of James's account of emotions. I will then discuss James's account of sensations and perceptions in section 3, and argue against the view that James's emotions are sensations (in section 4), thus undercutting the tenability of labelling James's account a 'feeling theory.' I will then outline James's view on instincts in section 5, and, in section 6, I will argue that many of James's emotions are actually instincts. I will close by devoting some space to elaborating what the function of Jamesian emotions might be in section 7.

II. EMOTIONS

The ignominiously labelled 'feeling theory' begins innocuously enough, with a division of emotions into coarse and subtle.⁵ Subtle emotions (which will be largely set aside here), are defined as those "feelings of pleasure and displeasure, of interest and excitement, bound up with mental operations, but having no obvious bodily expressions for their consequence" (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449).⁶ James's account, however, focuses primarily on the coarse emotions "in which a wave of bodily disturbance of some kind accompanies the perception of the interesting sights or sounds, or the passage of the exciting train of ideas" (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449). Coarse emotions include the usual suspects – grief, fear, anger, love (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449) – as well as some of the less frequently encountered ones, such as surprise, curiosity, rapture, lust and greed (James, 1884, 189).

Prior to elaborating his own views on emotions, however, James first outlines his *bête noire* – what he calls our 'natural way' of thinking about coarse emotions. According to him, we naturally think of emotions as occurring in the following sequence: a mental perception of a fact excites an emotion, which in turn gives rise to a bodily expression (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). On this 'natural way' of thinking about emotions, a loss of fortune, for example, excites the emotion of sadness, which in turn gives rise to tears, or an encounter with a bear precipitates the emotion of fear, subsequently causing one to run away (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449).

According to James, however, this 'natural' view of emotions is inverted. James thinks that the proper way to think about the emotion-sequence is to view "the bodily

changes [as following] directly the perception of the exciting fact; [...] our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion” (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). On James’s view, then, we are sad because we shed tears over our lost fortunes, or fearful because we are shaking; it is *not* the case that we shed tears or shake because we are sad or afraid, respectively.

James remained consistently committed to this view of emotions. The claim that when we perceive some exciting fact, our feeling of bodily changes that follow that perception *is* the emotion is reiterated several times in the Jamesian corpus. First, it appears in the 1884 article “What is an emotion?”⁷ James then restated it in 1890, in the *Principles of Psychology*. As Barbalet (1999) notes, the *Principles*’ Emotions chapter was retained (albeit in a somewhat condensed form) for re-publication, in 1892, as chapter 24 of *Psychology: Briefer Course*. The final restatement of this view can be found in 1894’s “The Physical Basis of Emotion.”⁸

James’s unwavering commitment to his view on emotions, moreover, manifests itself in the absence of disagreement in the literature regarding what James’s position *is*. In discussions of James’s theory, what is referred to – invariably – is his view that “the bodily changes [follow] directly the perception of an exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion”⁹ (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). Where the controversy *does* arise, therefore, is with respect to the *tenability* of James’s account. Four types of criticisms are typically levied against James’s view (Barbalet, 1999). First, it is argued that Jamesian emotions lack function, *pace* contemporary neuroscientific findings on emotions. Second, James’s account is charged with failing to recognise the import of experience in emotion. The third set of criticisms accuses James of overstating the importance of the body in emotion and, finally, the fourth charges James with proffering a theory that is empirically false.¹⁰

It is beyond the remit of this paper to consider all of these charges in an adequate detail. I will therefore focus only on the charge of functionlessness. Two members of the cavalry leading the charge against James, here, are Keith Oatley and Antonio Damasio. Oatley charges Jamesian emotions with being “at best a kind of froth on top of the real business of behaviour” (Oatley, 1992, 133), and, in a similar vein, Damasio (1994) accuses James of saying little about the possible function of emotions. An account of

emotions that fails to award any type of function to emotions is in tension with the findings of contemporary neuroscience, which suggests that emotions *do* have a function (Damasio, 1994; Carroll, 2001). Therefore, if, as critics charge, Jamesian emotions are functionless entities, then his account is rightly dismissed. I think, however, that a dismissal of James's account – at least on the grounds of emotions' functionlessness – is premature. This is because for James, many emotions are actually instincts, which entails that Jamesian emotions *do* have a function. To show this, however, let us first consider James's account of sensations and evaluate the feasibility of ascribing to James the view that emotions are sensations.

III. SENSATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

In contrast to his voluminous writings on emotions, James's writings on sensations are quite scarce, comprising only two chapters in *Principles of Psychology*. This dearth of attention may be due to James's dislike for sensations as an area of study in psychology (Boring, 1942). The consequence of this inattention, however, is that James's views on sensations lack the impact of his writings on emotions (Dember, 1990).¹¹

Lack of attention notwithstanding, James *does* make some claims about the sensations and perceptions, from which his views can be gleaned. For edification on the subject matter of natural history and classification of sensation, more generally, he encourages the reader to turn to physiology textbooks (James, 1890, 3).¹² The focus in the chapters that James actually devotes to the discussion of sensations and perceptions is rather narrow, consisting largely in juxtaposing sensations and perceptions.

In order to convey what a sensation is, James offers the following example. In schools for the blind, numerous *conceptual* facts about light are imparted on the students: the light's refraction, reflection, spectrum properties, and so forth. None of these facts, however, constitute *sensible* knowledge about light (James, 1890, 5). A sensation is the extremely simple content of our experience of the world (James, 1890, 2), the 'what-it's-like-ness' of having our sense organs affected (James, 1890, 77). According to James, sensations include, for example: hot, cold, colour, noise, and pain (James, 1879, 11; James, 1890, 1).

Sensations, moreover, appear to have two functions, for James.¹³ Their *direct* function is to acquaint us with the “bare immediate natures” of the objects we encounter in the world (James, 1890, 2; also 3 and 6). Their *indirect* function is first hinted at by the headings of a sub-section in chapter 17, “The Cognitive Function of Sensation” (James, 1890, 3). There, James approvingly discusses Locke’s view that sensations are the first, most foundational building blocks of our consciousness and no amount of creative thought would be able to generate an idea of a taste never tasted or a scent never smelled (James, 1890, 7). In other words, the indirect function of sensations appears to be the provision of fodder for our cognitive endeavours.

While *sensations* are characterised in terms of their extreme simplicity, Jamesian *perceptions* are significantly more complex. The more an object is something that is “located, measured, compared, assigned to a function, etc., etc.; the more unreservedly do we call the state of mind a perception” (James, 1890, 1, original punctuation). Perceptions include, for example, gradations of distance, shape, position, and size (James, 1890, 79, also 93, 103).¹⁴ Just like sensations, perceptions’ function is to acquaint us with the outside world (James, 1890, 1, also 2), however, perceptions are not quite as foundational as sensations are, since “before perceptions can come, sensations must have come” (James, 1890, 6).

Although differences between sensations and perceptions are therefore quite evident, James notes that the two terms do not carry very discriminate meanings in psychology (James, 1890, 1). This is because the two cannot – in practice – be differentiated in adult life (James, 1890, 79). Pure, simple sensations are possible only in infancy; in adulthood, no sensations are had without cotemporaneous perceptions (James, 1890, 1, also 7 and 76). That is, in adulthood, our experiences of the outside world are so complex, that it is difficult to ascertain which parts of those experiences are due to sensations and which are due to perceptions (James, 1890, 79). Sharp distinction between the two is difficult to draw and the various experiential aspects “shade gradually into each other, being one and all products of the same psychological machinery of association” (James, 1890, 77). Thus, what we *commonly refer to* as a simple sensation – a visual sensation, for example – is, in fact, according to James, a complex amalgam of a

sensation of colour and numerous perceptions intricately interwoven with it (James, 1890, 77).

IV. EMOTIONS AS SENSATIONS?

Because feeling theories assimilate emotions to sensations (Deigh, 1994), in labelling William James's theory of emotions a feeling theory, philosophers ascribe to him the view that emotions are sensations. Martha Nussbaum (2001), Robert Solomon (1976, 1993), Anthony Kenny (1963) and John Deigh (1994), for example, are among some of the philosophical champions of this view. The grounds on which this view rests are not entirely clear, since – as previously noted – James's account of sensations is almost never discussed in the literature. *Some* support for the view that Jamesian emotions are sensations is lent by James's statement that "our feeling of the changes as they occur is the emotion" (James 1890 449; James 1884 190). Nevertheless, there are several good reasons to resist this interpretation.

First, recall that on James's view, we may have pure sensations only in childhood. In adulthood, pure sensations can no longer be had – as a sensation "never takes place [...] without perception also being there" (James, 1890, 1). In other words, for James, the multitude of stimulations from the external world fuses into an undifferentiated experience (Dember, 1990). Given that James holds that it is impossible to tell which part of that experience is a sensation, and which part is a perception (James, 1890, 77), at most, one could claim that Jamesian emotions are an amalgam of perceptions and sensations.¹⁵ It is, of course, possible, that those who accept the 'feeling theory' interpretation of James's account of emotions simply rely on a *contemporary* (rather than *Jamesian*) understanding of sensations. If this is the case, however, the point would need to be made explicitly, and would require both a discussion of the particular account of sensations that underpins the claim, and an argument for the identity between that account of sensations and James's conceptualisation of emotions. Absent that, the ascription to James of the view that emotions are sensations is insufficiently grounded.

The second reason to refrain from labelling James's emotions sensations, is that *James himself* does not do so. What appears to lend credence to the view that Jamesian emotions are sensations is the claim that "the bodily changes follow directly the

perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur *is* the emotion” (James, 1890, 449; James, 1884, 190). Interestingly enough, despite using the term ‘perception’ here, James does not use the term ‘sensation’ – although one would have expected him to do so, given that he treats the two concepts together in the *Principles*. Moreover, he repeatedly *describes* the various bodily changes that occur in emotions – the shaking (in fear), the tears (in grief) (James, 1890, 450; James, 1884, 190) and the many other changes that occur (James, 1890, 462; James, 1884, 197) – but at no point does he use the term ‘sensations’ to refer to these changes.¹⁶

There is yet another – even stronger, I think – reason to resist the view that James’s emotions are sensations: namely, that James explicitly labels many emotions as states *other than* sensations. To clarify this, however, we must first briefly consider James’s discussion of instincts.

V. INSTINCTS

Although Harlow (1969) once asserted that James’s insights on instincts constitute one of his greatest contributions to the study of psychology, little scholarship on this topic was produced among the many publications celebrating the centennial of the publication of *Principles of Psychology*, in 1990 (Dewsbury, 1992). Since then, James’s work on instincts has received some attention from many prominent scholars in the field of evolutionary psychology – including Pinker (1994) and Tooby and Cosmides (1992).¹⁷ Outside of that particular niche, however, James’s writings on instincts generally appear to garner as much attention as do his writings on sensations: that is to say, very little.

There is some indication that the topic of instincts was important to James himself. As Dewsbury (1992) points out, the topic recurs throughout the *Principles*, and when the book was abridged, the chapter devoted to the topic of instinct was shortened less than other chapters. What, then, are James’s views on the subject matter? James defines instincts as those actions which “produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in the performance” (James, 1887a, 355; James, 1890, 383). He further divides instincts into two types. First, he counts among instincts those actions which “go no further than our own bodies” – for example, the facial expression generated when observing a novel object. Second, he also includes among instincts those actions

which “take effect upon the outer world”, such as a flight from a wild beast, or mimicry of a friend’s actions (James, 1890, 403).

James holds that humans possess the largest number of instincts of any creature, since we possess all of the instincts that lower creatures possess, and great many instincts in addition to those (James, 1887b, 666; James, 1890, 390). Some of the human instincts include: sucking, biting, chewing, spitting, grasping objects, pointing, swallowing, alimentation, locomotion, etc (James, 1890, 403). Among the lower animals, James considers egg-laying (James, 1890, 388), silk-worm’s winding of her cocoon and hawk’s use of talons against her prey (James, 1890, 383) to be instinctive.

James charges his contemporaries with an undue preference for describing instincts by reference to their function (James, 1887a, 355; James, 1890, 383). James’s own description of instincts emphasises their physiology because he thinks this approach yields more clarity – as many of the relevant creatures lack the abstract concepts invoked in functional description of instincts. Thus, typical in his discussion is a statement that “*instinctive actions* are called forth by determinate *sensory stimuli* in contact with the *animal’s body*, or at a distance in his environment” (James, 1890, 384, emphases added) which highlights the physical nature of the instinct, rather than what it does – or does not – accomplish.

The emphasis on the physiological rather than functional description of instincts, however, ought not to be interpreted as a *denial* that instincts have functions. On the contrary, James’s very definition of instincts – as actions that produce particular ends – suggests that instincts *do* have a function for James. While James’s preference for physiological rather than functional descriptions precludes him from engaging in an extended discussion on the subject-matter of instincts’ functions, his views can be gleaned from several remarks he *does* make. It seems that for James, the function of instincts is related to self-preservation or, in other words, survival. This is suggested, for example, by his claim that the truth of evolution requires that since “the destruction of prey and of human rivals must have been among the most important of man’s primitive functions, the fighting and the chasing instincts must have become ingrained” (James, 1890, 412, emphasis added).¹⁸

In “What is an instinct?” (1887a) James offers several examples that help to shed additional light on what he takes the function of instincts to be. He notes, for example, that a bird “knows instinctively how to press oil from a gland and apply it to the feather”. A snake knows without being taught how to utilise his poison against his enemies, while a silk-worm winds a cocoon, which “forms a safe abode for herself in the period of transformation” and a hawk instinctively knows how to use her talons against her prey (James, 1887a, 355). All of these instinctive actions – instances of protection of bodily integrity, defence from attack, construction of shelter and self-nourishment, respectively – are survival-oriented actions. To charge Jamesian instincts with the function of ensuring survival, therefore, does not seem implausible.

VI. EMOTIONS AS INSTINCTS

Given instincts’ survival-oriented function, if it can be shown that emotions are a species of instincts for James, then emotions will *ipso facto* have a function – contrary to the aforementioned charges of functionlessness levied against James by Damasio and Oatley. There are three reasons in favour of adopting the view that emotions are instincts for James. An important caveat must be added here – not *all* emotions are instincts for James – but *many are*.

The first reason in favour of adopting the view that many Jamesian emotions are instincts is his claim that “instinctive reactions and emotional expressions [...] shade imperceptibly into each other” (James, 1890, 442). James’s point here is that in some cases the boundary between what is an instinct and what is an emotion is difficult to draw (James, 1890, 77). Thus, if we take seriously James’s injunction that in cases where it is difficult to draw an exact line “on the whole, it is best to be catholic”¹⁹, this tells in favour of identifying at least some emotions as instincts.

Further support for the claim that some emotions are instincts can be derived from James’s identifying several states as both emotions and instincts. Anger, for example, is implicitly identified as an instinct by its inclusion in the section of *Principles*’ Chapter 24 (“Instinct”), which focuses on enumerating human instincts (James, 1890, 409). In numerous locations elsewhere in the Jamesian corpus, anger is explicitly identified as an emotion (e.g. James, 1890, 409 & 474; also James, 1894/1994, 206). In many other cases

the states explicitly identified as emotions, are also explicitly identified as instincts. For example, fear, is said by James to be “one of the three most exciting *emotions* of which our nature is susceptible” is also identified – only two lines later – as “*a genuine instinct*, and one of the earliest shown by the human child” (James, 1890, 415, emphases added). Elsewhere in the chapter, the “utterly blind *instinctive* character” of fear is said to be demonstrated by reason’s inability to control it (James, 1890, 418, emphasis added).²⁰ James also identifies sympathy as both an emotion and an instinct (James, 1890, 410). Love (James, 1890, 411; James, 1887b, 678) and hate (James, 1890, 411) are, too, labelled as both instincts and emotions (James, 1890, 474 and James, 1890, 448, respectively). Finally, shame – an “*instinctive* impulse²¹ to hide certain parts of the body” (James, 1887b, 676) – is also elsewhere identified by James as an emotion (James, 1890, 474).

In short, James clearly identifies at least 6 states – anger, fear, sympathy, love, hate and shame – as both emotions and instincts. It is worth noting that in his initial statement of the definition of emotion – as the feeling of bodily changes – James offers three examples: grief (upon loss of fortune), fear (upon encountering the bear) and anger (towards a rival who insults us) (James, 1890, 449). It is therefore quite suggestive that of his three paradigmatic emotions, two – namely, anger and fear – are also labelled instincts.

Finally, the third reason in favour of adopting the view that many of Jamesian emotions are instincts, is James’s statement identifying the two, at the beginning of *Principles*’ Chapter 25, “The Emotions”:

Emotional reactions are often excited by objects with which we have no practical dealings. A ludicrous object, for example, or a beautiful object are not necessarily objects to which we *do* anything; we simply laugh, or stand in admiration, as the case may be. *The class of emotional, is thus rather larger than that of instinctive, impulses*, commonly so called. Its stimuli are more numerous, and its expressions are more internal and delicate, and often less practical. *The physiological plan and essence of*

the two classes of impulse, however, is the same. (James, 1890, 442; emphases added)

James makes three important claims here. First, he points out that ‘emotions’ are a larger class than ‘instincts’. This precludes us from claiming that *all* emotions are instincts for James, for, as the above quote implies, some emotions are not instincts.²² Nevertheless, as identified above, many *are* – including two of the three states he identifies as emotions in his discussion of the definition of emotions. Second, James also notes here that the ‘essence’ of emotions and instincts is the same. What, precisely, James means by ‘essence’ is not entirely clear – he does not define the term. This suggests that he may be using the term in its conventional sense – to mean the very nature of a thing (Johnson, 1755-56). Third, he points out that emotions and instincts share a ‘physiological plan.’ Recall, James emphasises that instincts ought to be discussed in terms of physiology (rather than function) in order to yield the most clarity. The significance of James’s claim that emotions and instincts are identical with regard to what he considers to be one of their most salient properties – their physiology – therefore cannot be overemphasised.

The connection between Jamesian emotions and instincts has thus far not merited much attention in the literature – perhaps obscured by the dominant interpretation of his account of emotions as sensations. Occasionally, however, the link between emotions and instincts *has* been tentatively suggested. Dewsbury (1992), for example, notes that James viewed emotions as intimately linked to instincts, but takes the significance of this to be that instincts are therefore at the centre of Jamesian psychology, much like emotions are. Golightly (1953), similarly, points out that Darwin’s influence caused James to link emotions and instincts, and to emphasise the biological aspect of the former. Barbalet (1999), finally, points out that James’s chapter on instincts *does* discuss several emotions, but falls short of drawing the conclusion about what this suggests.²³

Although the claim that some Jamesian emotions are instincts thus appears plausible and is, moreover, not entirely without precedent, two challenges may nevertheless be raised in response to this claim. First, one may object to classifying one set of states as another set of states. However, those who categorise Jamesian emotions as

sensations – by labelling his account of emotions a ‘feeling theory’ – adopt the same move: categorising one class of states as another.²⁴ In other words, if there is nothing improper about categorising emotions as sensations, there ought to be nothing improper about categorising emotions as instincts. In light of James’s claims about emotions and instincts, such categorisation is, in fact, obligatory. Second, one may challenge that it is rather peculiar to categorise emotions as brute instincts, since many emotions are quite sophisticated. To this, however, one may respond by noting that *James’s* understanding of ‘instinct’ is quite broad. In Chapter 24 (“Instinct”) of the *Principles* alone, James counts among human instincts such varied states as: biting, pointing at objects, smiling, turning the head aside, holding head erect, standing, pugnacity, hunting, kleptomania, playing, sociability and shyness, secretiveness, cleanliness, jealousy, and parental love, among others (James, 1890, 403-440). While one may, perhaps, be reluctant to categorise emotions as instincts on a *contemporary* account of instincts, within *Jamesian* taxonomy, it is permissible to do so.

VII. EMOTIONS’ FUNCTIONS

What yet remains to be shown is the significance of the categorisation of Jamesian emotions as instincts. What is most salient here, I think, is the *implication* of this categorisation. Given that instincts clearly do have a function for James, categorising emotions as instincts entails that those emotions, too, have a function. Because James focuses on the *physical* nature of emotions rather than their *function* – the same approach he adopts in his discussion of instincts – one of the criticisms levied against his account is that on James’s view, emotions are functionless (Oatley, 1992; Damasio 1994).²⁵ Showing that James’s emotions have a function would therefore not only undercut this criticism, but also place James’s account of emotions in line with contemporary research which suggests that the function of emotion consists in “and motivating an organism to contend with challenges in its environment” (Palencik, 2007, 776).

But what is the nature of this function? If Jamesian emotions are instincts, then the emotions’ function must also centre on self-preservation.²⁶ While the dearth of discussion about the emotions’ function precludes establishing with absolute certainty that this is, in fact, the case, some claims made by James in chapter 10 of the *Principles*

(“The Consciousness of Self”) suggest exactly that. In this chapter, James defines self-seeking as “providing for the future [self] as distinguished from maintaining the present” one (James, 1890, 307), further differentiating between bodily self-seeking and social self-seeking²⁷. Although James does not explicitly define either sub-category of self-seeking, the definition of self-seeking itself suggests that the bodily self-seeking would require providing for the future self’s *physical* well-being, and *mutatis mutandis* for *social* self-seeking. And, while successful social self-seeking seems *prima facie* less important to self-preservation than successful bodily self-seeking, the import of social self-seeking may not be underestimated on James’s view, as for him, our fellow human beings – that is, our *social* milieu – are the most important part of our environment (James, 1884, 195).

Is it possible that those emotions that are also identified as instincts function in either of these two ways? In his discussion of bodily self-seeking, James notes that fear and anger are useful in the same way as acts of alimentation and defence (James, 1890, 307). Moreover, he points out, that “we must class both anger and fear with the hunting, the acquisitive, the home-constructing and the tool-constructing instincts, as *impulses to self-seeking of the bodily kind*” (James, 1890, 307; emphases added). That is, fear and anger – two of the six states identified as both emotions and instincts – are here, first, clearly identified here as *having functions*, and, second, they are said to function in providing for our future physical well-being.

What of social self-seeking, which is centred on providing for our future *social* well-being? James identifies our “amativeness and friendliness, our desire to please and attract notice and admiration, our emulation and jealousy, our love of glory” as conducive to our social self-seeking (James, 1890, 308). Thus, it appears that of the four remaining states that James classifies as both emotions and instincts – sympathy, love, hate and shame – not one is straightforwardly invoked here. However, a species of love is mentioned – the love of glory – and, at the conclusion of the paragraph, James implicitly points to the role of hate in social self-seeking, noting that many a person will “take a deal of trouble to dazzle some insignificant cad whose whole personality they heartily despise” (James, 1890, 309). Moreover, all four emotion-instincts seem to fit rather well

with what James seems to want to convey here, as all four focus on our interactions with our fellow human beings (under normal circumstances).

Thus, it seems plausible to accept that the function of Jamesian emotions centres on preserving our well-being – which is consistent with James’s understanding of many emotions as instincts. This includes both our *physical* well-being (centred on our natural environment) and *social* well-being (centred on our social environment). Far from being the froth on the business of behaviour – to borrow Oatley’s phrase – Jamesian emotions *do* have a function – and a rather fundamental one at that.

One potential worry for this view is that, according to James, emotions “usually terminate in the subject’s own body, whilst the instinctive reaction is apt to go farther and enter into practical relations with the exciting object” (James, 1890, 442). This claim seems to undermine the functional reading of emotion, for if emotion fails to enter into practical relations with the world, then how is it to function in self-preservation?

To this, however, one can respond by making two points. First, it must be noted that the claim here cited effectively compares apples to oranges. This is because the claim that is made with respect to emotions is *ontological* – it describes what emotions are, viz. states that usually terminate in the body. The claim pertaining to instincts, on the other hand, is *functional* – it describes what instincts do, namely enter into relations with their causes. Thus, the juxtaposition between the emotion claim and the instinct claim fails to imply that emotions do not enter into practical relations with the world.

Second – let us suppose that it *were* the case that the claim made here implied that emotions usually fail to enter into practical relations in the world. We must note that the qualification ‘usually’ suggests that not all emotions are thought to be problematic here. Running away from a bear in fear for one’s life certainly *does* seem to enter into practical relations with the world. What could be considered more problematic here, perhaps, are emotions like shame or sympathy. However, here we can advert to James’s distinction between physical self-seeking and social self-seeking. Even emotions like shame or sympathy, whose interactions with the world appear more muted than the running away from a bear, can advance social self-seeking. This could be accomplished if, for example, they serve to communicate a shared moral code. Subtleness of the interactions with the

world – which *may* be termed a failure to interact with the world in a *practical* way – need not, therefore, preclude emotions from fulfilling their function.

VIII. CONCLUSION

William James's theory of emotions thus seems overdue for a re-evaluation. While some re-evaluation of the tenability of James's theory appears to be taking place, philosophers generally continue to dismiss James's theory, on account of its being classified as a feeling theory of emotions. A closer examination of James's (generally neglected) account of sensations, however, shows this categorisation to be questionable. A similar examination of his (likewise generally neglected) account of instincts, moreover, reveals that for James, many emotions are actually instincts. This re-categorisation of Jamesian emotions as instincts undercuts an oft-levied charge against James's account, that his emotions are functionless. James's emotions indeed *do* have a function – a self-preservative one. Thus, far from deserving dismissal or recognition as valuable only as a starting point for research on emotions, James's account of emotions merits bringing back into the fold of legitimate inquiry.²⁸

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NOTES

¹James's theory of emotions is often referred to in the literature as the James-Lange theory. James himself was aware of the similarities between his and Lange's views, acknowledging them in "The Physical Basis of Emotion" (1894/1994). C.f. Lang (1994) and Mandler (1990), who argue that James's and Lange's accounts have different emphases.

²See also Mandler (1990) for a version of this argument.

³See, e.g.: Deigh (1994), Yanal (1999), Dixon (2003), Lyons (1980), Kenny (1963), Damasio (1994) and Nussbaum (2001). Calhoun and Solomon (1984) identify James's theory as a "physiological theory" while defining physiological theories much like feeling theories are defined here, and thus should be counted here, as well. Cf. Ellsworth (1994) who ascribes to James a cognitive theory of emotions.

⁴Philosophers of emotion have now generally abandoned feeling theories for cognitivist theories of emotions. Briefly, cognitivist theories hold that our emotions are just like other mental states which are intentional. See Deigh (1994) for a discussion of cognitivist theories, and some of the problems underlying feeling theories of emotions.

⁵In "What is an emotion?" (1884) this distinction is drawn in terms of 'standard' and 'intellectual' emotions. The definitions of each are identical to 'coarse' and 'subtle' emotions, respectively.

⁶James offers identical (or nearly identical) accounts of emotion in “What is an emotion?” (1884) and Chapter 25 (“The Emotions”) of *Principles of Psychology* (1890). References to both sources are therefore given where applicable.

⁷Feinstein points out that some evidence exists that James was committed to this view even prior to his 1884’s “What is an emotion?”, as James wrote on his copy of Lotze’s *Medicinische Psychologie* (which he is thought to have read in 1867-68): “emotions due to bodily reverberations” (Feinstein, 1970, footnote 10)

⁸In other words, James was committed to this view for at least a decade, and possibly for as long as 27 years, if Feinstein’s speculation is correct.

⁹These lines are cited, for example, by Palencik (2007), Laird and Bressler (1990), Feinstein (1970), Golightly (1953), Ellsworth (1994), Cannon (1927), Deigh (1994), Myers (1969), Ratcliffe (2005), Barbalet (1999).

¹⁰For the first type of criticism, see Damasio (1994) and Oatley (1992). For the second type of criticism, see Damasio (1994). For the third and fourth types of criticisms, see Cannon (1927).

¹¹See, however, Dember’s (1990) argument that James’s writings on sensations and perceptions manifest themselves in several strands of contemporary psychological research.

¹²He refers the reader specifically to Martin’s “Human Body,” Bernstein’s “Five Senses of man,” Wundt’s “Physiological Psychology” or Hermann’s “Handbuch der Physiologie” volume 3 (James, 1890, 3, footnote 3).

¹³The terminology used here is mine; James does not discuss sensations’ function as either direct or indirect. It is worth noting, however, that this entails that even if emotions *were* sensations for James (as it is commonly understood), Jamesian emotions *would* have a function, *pace* Oatley and Damasio.

¹⁴Ellsworth (1994) goes as far as to argue that when James used the term ‘perception’ he meant to convey something more akin to a cognitive appraisal than to a sensation. Palencik (2007), similarly, attributes to James the view that perception is an evaluative understanding of a situation.

¹⁵Admittedly, James concedes that we *do* refer to our complex experiential amalgams as sensations. However, according to him, this is simply a shorthand (James, 1890, 77).

¹⁶Moreover, interpreting ‘feeling’ to be synonymous with Jamesian ‘sensation’ would be problematic since, as Myers (1986) notes, James’s use of the term ‘feeling’ is inconsistent in his writings.

¹⁷Cf. Suplizio (2007), who argues that evolutionary psychologists lack basis for positive comparisons between their own views on instincts and James’s views.

¹⁸James thinks that this is the case *generally* but not *always*. In other words, he thinks that some instincts cannot be explained by adverting to survival. For example, our fear of heights is instinctive but not survival-related; he thinks it is “a mere incidental peculiarity of the nervous system” (James, 1890, 419). The example seems to be rather poorly chosen, as avoiding precipices and heights *does* seem rather relevant to increasing one’s odds of survival, but James’s general point is well taken – some instincts may have outgrown their evolutionary utility in modern times.

¹⁹In context of his consideration of the two types of actions that James classifies as instincts, he notes that “on the whole it is best to be catholic, since it is very hard to draw an exact line” between the actions that go no further than our bodies and ones that take effect upon the outer world (James, 1890, 403).

²⁰Fear is also identified as an emotion at (James, 1887b, 672), and as an instinct at (James, 1887b, 666).

²¹James uses here the term ‘impulse’ rather than ‘instinct.’ James thinks that the two terms are equivalent, pointing out that “*every instinct is an impulse*. Whether we shall call such impulses as blushing, sneezing, coughing, smiling, or dodging, or keeping time to music, instincts or not, is *a mere matter of terminology*. *The process is the same through-out*” (James, 1890, 385, emphases added).

²²It is beyond the remit of this paper to establish which of James’s emotions, precisely, are *not* instincts, and why. One possible explanation here is that James is adverting to his distinction between coarse and subtle emotions.

²³Although these suggestions are consistent with the argument I am here putting forth, none benefit from an expanded discussion, and none draw out the conclusion that (many) emotions are instincts for James.

²⁴Although whether they categorise James's emotions as *Jamesian* sensations or as sensations on some type of a *contemporary* account of sensations, is difficult to discern due to the dearth of discussion on this point.

²⁵Ratcliffe (2005) goes as far as to claim that James's failure to elaborate an explicit account of the functions of emotions *justifies* the interpretation of Jamesian emotions as functionless.

²⁶I am here in agreement with Barbalet who notes that for James the function of emotions is evolutionary in that they "prompt particular types of actions, especially actions associated with self-seeking and self-preservation" (Barbalet, 1999, 260). As far as I can tell, Barbalet is the only one who takes his view of James's emotions; Barbalet cites no other secondary literature sources in agreement with his claim. Where we do differ, however, is in the emphasis on the instinctive nature of emotions. Barbalet notes that the import of James's claim that "the emotional reaction usually terminates in the subject's own body" is that emotion is *not* like instinct (Barbalet, 1999, 254). Given James's division of instincts into those that "go no further than our own bodies" and "those which take effect upon the outer world" (James, 1890, 443), I do not think that Barbalet's interpretation is tenable. Unfortunately, the focus of Barbalet's article is primarily on the relationship between emotion and consciousness, and this point does not benefit from an expanded discussion.

²⁷James also includes here spiritual self-seeking as the third category. Because spiritual self-seeking centres on our psychic or religious progress, it will be set aside here.

²⁸Thanks are due to Paul Griffiths, Charles Wolfe, Tobias Cheung, Marga Vicedo, and Mark Solovey, for their very helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.