

Interpreting Which Came First: Feeling or Thinking?

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In February 1984, in the journal *American Psychologist*, a fundamental difference of perspective in the developing cognitive neurosciences erupted into stark relief with the contentious debate between R.B. Zajonc, of the University of Michigan, and R.S. Lazarus, of the University of California at Berkeley. Zajonc contributed a paper entitled “On the Primacy of Affect” and Lazarus rejoined with “On the Primacy of Cognition.” The purpose here is not to attempt to establish which author was ‘correct’ (although I do have an opinion) but rather to interpret this representative debate within a *hermeneutical* framework – and in particular the hermeneutical framework introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey beginning in the late 19th century.

Dilthey’s special contribution was to establish hermeneutics as “the foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften* – that is, all the humanities and social sciences, all those disciplines which interpret expressions of man’s inner life, whether the expression be gestures, historical actions, codified law, art works, or literature” (Palmer, 1969, p. 98). Bentz (2011) asserts that the German *Geisteswissenschaften* – with the root word *geist*, or ‘spirit,’ implying works of the human *spirit* – is often a more appropriately invoking phrase than the English “Humanities.” “It was Dilthey’s aim to develop methods of gaining “objectively valid” interpretations of “expressions of inner life”” (Palmer, *Ibid*), and by doing so to craft hermeneutics into a respectable ‘science’ that could replace introspective psychologism as the basis for understanding works of the human spirit; and although Dilthey was not entirely successful at this, nevertheless we see here already an attempt, *in the name of gaining credibility in his day*, to objectify lessons of the spirit and to frame human understanding scientifically.

Dilthey’s other major contribution, which would become a foundation for later developments by Heidegger and Gadamer, was to place hermeneutics in context; that is, to provide “historicality:”

Kant had written a *Critique of Pure Reason* which laid the epistemological foundations for the sciences. Dilthey consciously set for himself the task of writing a “critique of historical reason” which would lay the epistemological foundation for the “human studies” (Palmer, 1969, p. 100).

The justification here was that any work of the human spirit ultimately derives its meaning as an expression of the historical age in which it appears – indeed, Dilthey often writes as if an impersonal force, “an expression of life” (Palmer, p. 112), were acting through individual

human agents, giving voice and vision to the needs of the times. Palmer (p. 118) describes well this phenomenon:

In hermeneutical theory, man is seen as dependent on constant interpretation of the past, and thus it could almost be said that man is the “hermeneutical animal,” who understands himself in terms of interpreting a heritage and shared world bequeathed him from the past, a heritage constantly present and active in all his actions and decisions. In historicity, modern hermeneutics finds its theoretical foundations.

How, then, can we apply this hermeneutical understanding to the Zajonc-Lazarus debate of 1984? Let’s first get a feel for the substance of the debate.

In “On the Primacy of Affect,” Zajonc begins by referencing his earlier paper “Feeling and Thinking” (1980), which includes the provocative subtitle “Preferences Need No Inferences” – “deliberately suggesting an occasional independence of emotion from cognition” (Zajonc, 1984, p. 117). In this paper, Zajonc “tried to appeal for a more concentrated study of affective phenomena that have been ignored for decades, and at the same time to ease the heavy reliance on cognitive functions for the explanation of affect” (Ibid). It’s important to note that “ignored for decades” is an historical reference; thus, we might assume that during the decades in question a paradigm favoring the cognitive over the affective was in operation in the cognitive neurosciences. In his 1980 paper, Zajonc chooses to quote the psychologist W. Wundt, from a 1907 essay, to demonstrate that in the early days of psychology there was in fact a school favoring the affective. Here’s what Wundt had to say:

When any physical process rises above the threshold of consciousness, it is the affective elements which as soon as they are strong enough, first become noticeable [...] In a similar manner...the clear apperception of ideas in acts of cognition and recognition is always preceded by feelings (pp. 243-44, as cited in Zajonc, 1980, p. 152).

Quoting Wundt is no stray remark; for by it Zajonc is attempting to give credibility to his argument by situating it within an historical precedent.

Lazarus, too, in the opening stages of his argument, chooses to situate his position historically: “In the 1940s and 1950s, a period characterized by the scientific outlook sometimes called logical positivism, the dominant view in psychology was that emotions could not be defined and studied as such but represented intervening variables” (Lazarus, 1984, p. 125). This was the period dominated by the rise of computer science, when respectable psychologists lent their energies to developing *computational* metaphors of mind (Lackoff & Johnson, 1999), theories that could accurately portray the mind in terms of “information processing” and the symbolic manipulation of “representational data.” Zajonc (1980, p. 153) displays a schematic of this sort of model:

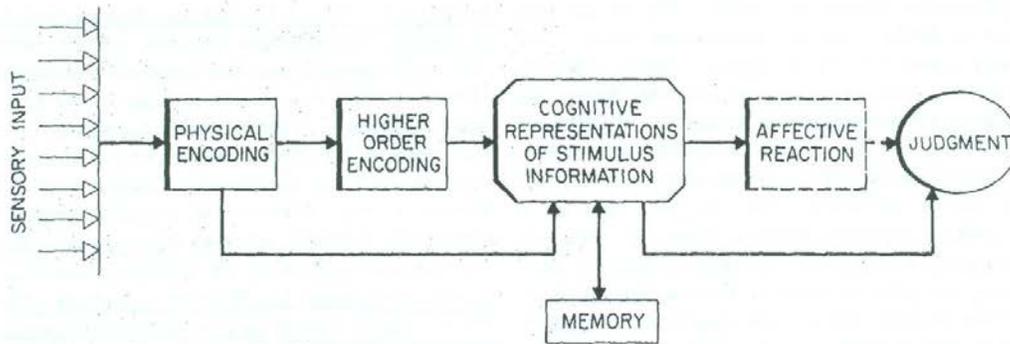


Figure 1. Typical information-processing model of affect.

We can see in this information-processing model that “cognitive representations” already have central status and primacy over the easily overlooked and subsequent “affective reaction” – it’s part of the computational metaphor, a justification for describing mind in relation to computer language, an *historically situated* condition arising during the socio-technological transformations of the middle of the 20th century. Based on this perspective, and representing this school, it is not surprising then to hear Lazarus exclaim:

Rather than the question Zajonc ponders, which is whether emotion can occur without cognition, I think it is more interesting and useful to ask about the kinds of cognition...capable of arousing emotions of different kinds and intensities, such as fear, anger, guilt, disappointment, sadness, joy, relief, happiness, and love at different stages of life. These are some of the emotions of great significance in human affairs because they arise from our changing functional relationships with the world and reflect our appraisal of how we are faring in our personal and social agendas. Zajonc’s question, although legitimate, *is subordinate to the larger issue of how cognition shapes emotion* (1984, p. 126, added emphasis).

I provided emphasis on this last phrase because it reveals that Lazarus entered the debate using pre-conceived determinations about the primacy of cognition, *even though the whole point of having the debate was to provide evidence justifying this primacy either way*. Lazarus does this, I would interpret, because he is historically and inflexibly situated in a particular school of scholarship, the “information processing” school of cognitive neuroscience. Zajonc responds to the oversight of Lazarus by noting, rather dryly, “Because the emotional reaction is *defined* as requiring cognitive appraisal as a crucial precondition, it must be present whether we have evidence of it or not” (1984, p. 117, original emphasis).

Such is the result of using a Diltheyan hermeneutics to interpret a difference of perspective in a scholarly journal of psychology. As to which side of the debate Dilthey himself

would align, this much we can surmise: “Dilthey held that the dynamics of man’s inner life are a complex matter of cognition, feeling, and will, and that these cannot be made subject to the norms of causality and the rigidness of mechanistic, quantifying thinking” (Palmer, 1969, p. 102). As to which side of the debate current theorists would align, some quarter century later, my impression is that there has been a recent surge to emphasize *feeling* in the total “lived experience” of the human being. This impression can be evidenced, for example, by noting the widespread influence neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has exerted with the publication of such titles as *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), and *Looking for Spinoza: Joy Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (2003). Perhaps this re-emphasis on *feeling* is long overdue; for, as Teresa Brennan observes in her *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), there are subtle energetic distinctions between affects, moods, sentiments, feelings, and emotions – distinctions that will never be accounted for in a computational theory of mind, distinctions that influence all our social interactions, distinctions that require ever more sensitized awareness of internal somatic states. I’m sure that R.B. Zajonc would be very happy to know about this latest direction.

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