The Fall of Motivation, the Rise of Emotion: A Philosophical Insight to Avoid the Saturation of Resembling Concepts

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Motivation is a topic which attracts interest of both educators and researchers around the world. Echoing with the popularity of motivation, it is often the case that a psychological model which posits cognition and emotion/affect is criticized as being dichotomous, overlooking the important third mental faculty, motivation. Obviously, the underlying premise behind such criticism is that motivation as well as emotion and cognition is a distinct psychological entity that deserves special consideration.

It is true that there has been a long tradition of conceptualizing the human mental faculty trichotomously. Plato separated human soul tripartitely into logistikon (λογιστικόν, logical), thymoeides (θυμοειδές, spirited), and epithymetikon (ἐπιθυμητικόν, libidinous), from the highest to the lowest (Plato, 380 BC/1892). Kantian faculties of soul consist of the faculty of knowledge, valenced feelings, and the faculty of desire/will (Kant, 1790/1987). Perice’s Kainopythagorean categories consist of monad/firstness, dyad/secondness, and triad/thirdness (Peirce, nd/1958, para. 7.528; cf. Peirce’s theorem; de Waal, 2013, p. 42).

Such trichotomy of human mental faculty is also pervasive in the field of education and AL. According to Dörnyei (2009), cognition, emotion/affect, and motivation are distinguishable, and it is useful to maintain the tripartite view to conceptualize these three dimensions of the mind as three subsystems, albeit interacting with one another (pp. 234-235). As Dörnyei (1998) summarizes Gardner’s (1985) social psychological approach, motivation is “a kind of central mental ‘engine’ or ‘energy-centre’ that subsumes effort, want/will (cognition), and task-enjoyment (affect)” (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 122); thus, motivation is regarded to differ from emotion. The trichotomous paradigm has now become a dominant approach in AL (Waninge, 2015, p. 196).

Is the trichotomous view impeccable? The answer is nay. In fact, surprisingly enough, Scherer (1995), which Dörnyei (2009, p. 235) cites for further information, is against the tripartite ontology. Scherer declares that “the Platonian distinction between cognition, emotion, and conation has outrun its utility and may, in addition to provoking futile debates, seriously hamper progress towards urgently needed integrative approaches to the study of mental activity” (1995, p. 1) and therefore it is needed “to drop the fruitless thinking in 3 boxes” (ibid., p. 4). To summarize Scherer’s claims, psychological mechanisms are so complex and dynamic that it is inappropriate
to assume that only emotion, cognition, and motivation are the special three distinct mental modules in human mind. After all, the trichotomous distinction is nothing but the blind succession of ancient Western philosophy.\(^1\) Scherer’s criticism against trichotomy is not only ontological but also epistemological; trichotomous analysis of human mind is no less flawed than the estimation that there exists only three distinct parts constituting human mind. In reality, however, human mind consists of uncountable dynamic systems; the mind is a holistic complexity.

Having questioned the dogmatic application of psychological trichotomy,\(^2\) a different epistemology is called for. One approach is to turn to phenomenology: to deny any numerical distinction and to try to capture each here-and-now phenomenon as it occurs. Since any separation of mind into a limited number of modules cannot avoid being an oversimplification, it is a legitimate alternative solution. Although phenomenological qualitative studies have their own significant values, their findings are not to be generalized and they are not to replace quantitative studies.

Another approach, which is more suitable for scientific investigation, is accomplished via utilizing the Occam’s razor. Motivation, which directs emotional energy and cognitive attention to an external or internal object, can be interpreted as an amalgam of emotion and cognition, hence shaving it away from the model (e.g., Nobuhara, 2017).\(^3\) This is not a retrogression to the Cartesian dichotomy; cognition and emotion are no longer regarded as isolated mental entities but two epistemologically salient polarities in the mental continuum (Imbir et al., 2015). The emotion-cognition distinction in this sense is observer-dependent and epistemological rather than observer-independent and ontological, making it harmonious with dynamic systems ontology (Duncan & Barrett, 2007; Barrett, 2009). This emotion-cognition view is more parsimonious and is sometimes more powerful than the trichotomy, as is implied by the fact that the emotion-cognition model which posits no special module for motivation has been utilized in the latest investigations (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Schütze, 2017; Sharwood Smith, 2017). To take the MOGUL framework as an example (Sharwood Smith & Truscott, 2014), aside from the emotional/affective structures, no distinct module for motivation is modeled. After all, what underlies motivation for L2 learning is nothing but emotion (especially positive emotions), which is reported to be consistently and strongly correlated with motivation-related processes and variables (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017). Moreover, shaving away motivation may also be effective to avoid the saturation and confusion of a plethora of resembling concepts with overlapping neural substrates.

In conclusion, taking all these facts into account, it is justified to utilize the
emotion-cognition continuum paradigm with no explicit reference to motivation. Furthermore, emotion, whose importance is increasingly acknowledged and studied in AL (e.g., Dewaele, 2013), may well be a better and purer psychological concept/entity to adopt more widely instead of motivation (Ciompi, 1997/2005), especially at the micro-level analysis (cf. Kanazawa, 2016; 2017).

Notes.
1. Furthermore, Danziger’s (1997, Chapter 3 & 7) historico-philosophical review vividly shows that motivation is a flawed concept, so much for being a pure psychological entity. In fact, the signification of each psychological concept has constantly been influenced by social factors and has changed dramatically throughout history. In fact, each constituent of Platonian hierarchical tripartite souls barely bears a semantic resemblance to the present counterparts of cognition, emotion, and motivation.
2. It must be noted that what is proposed here is not to be interpreted as a rejection of psychological trichotomy altogether. It is undeniable that the trichotomous anchoring has been and will be indispensable in multidisciplinary investigations (cf. Eco & Sebeok, 1988; Minsky, 2006, p. 318). However, they should not limit their constituents to emotion/affect, cognition, and motivation/will/volition nor expel other approaches of analysis.
3. In fact, the term motivation is often used synonymously to emotion/affect (e.g., Polat, 2016). In such a case, motivation and emotion denote the same phenomenon from different perspectives rather than being ontologically distant entities.

References


Charles Sanders Peirce (Vols. 7–8; Paras. 7.524-7.538). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work written nd)


(1000 words excluding references)