The intentionality of bodily feelings

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Bodily responses are often taken to be essential features of emotional states. Less clear is the role played by the feeling of these bodily responses. I will argue that while bodily feelings are not necessary for emotions, they do contribute distinctive intentional content to emotions when they occur.

The additional intentional content provided by emotional bodily feelings is a predictable consequence of the capacity for self-monitoring. Emotions involve a fairly complex causal process, and it is typical for us to be able to attend to the different aspects of our bodily processes, particularly as we learn more about how our bodies function. It also makes sense from an evolutionary point of view that we are endowed with the ability to monitor our bodily responses (as opposed to sheer bodily sensation). By giving us a sense of our bodily capacities or powers, such monitoring contributes to planning.

For this reason we should not regard the intentional content provided by bodily feelings as merely a pattern of sensations but as providing representational information that is relevant to the status of the subject. I articulate the nature of this representation by appeal to a notion of ‘emotional space’ which is a sense of the general affordances offered by one’s body towards interactions with the world.