Emotions as Embodied Action-Oriented Representations

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Current philosophical theories tend to criticize not only cognitivist approaches to emotions but also theories that take emotions principally to be representations. Mainly among embodied and enactive approaches, there is a growing anti-representationalist consensus (e.g., Hutto 2012, Colombetti 2014). Authors describe emotions as “embodied attitudes” (Teroni, Deonna 2012) or as “enacting meaning” (Colombetti 2014). Such embodied accounts are highly promising when it comes to explaining how emotions feel, how they motivate for action, and how they have evolved. Yet, in my talk I will argue that embodied accounts fail to acknowledge the many arguments that speak in favor of emotions being representations. Conceptualizing emotions as representations a) allows us to explain our talk of emotions as being adequate or inadequate, b) it helps us to explain how emotions relate to other mental states and c) it also facilitates an explanation of how emotions can be about complex states of affairs, such as, the violation of social rules and norms. I will argue that no current embodied or enactive account that denies the representational status of emotions can account for these features. On the other hand, assuming that emotions are representations does not necessarily imply an over-intellectualization of the emotions. I propose instead to conceive of emotions as embodied action-oriented representations. Such representations are simple non-conceptual representations, they are constituted by patterns of bodily reactions and directly guide our behavior.