HOW TO DESIGN AN EMOTION

Summary of Part I: The Problem of Feeling and Emotion

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Abstract

This summary presents the argument of Part I of *How to Design an Emotion*, which asks what an emotion is before any theory measures, models, or treats it. The problem is not a shortage of evidence or of theories, but the lack of a stable ontology of affective states. Without identity conditions, researchers can describe, measure, and classify, yet still fail to identify the object they claim to study. The aim is not to offer a definition of emotion, but to set the standard every definition must meet. The method is diagnostic. Two accounts of pleasure, the Distinctive Feeling View and the Attitudinal View, are treated as test cases. Their collision, together with everyday cases and cited research, yields negative constraints on definition rather than a formal test. The main claims are three definitional rules (a part is never the whole, evidence is not identity, and a name is not understanding), the requirement that an emotion belong to a self-governing agent, and the further claim that emotional meaning depends on ideas and therefore cannot be defined before ideas are. Part I ends by opening the question that begins Part II: what, exactly, is an idea?

Keywords: emotion; feeling; pleasure; identity conditions; ontology of affective states; Distinctive Feeling View; Attitudinal View; self-governing agent; definition; affective science

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This is a summary of Part I of *How to Design an Emotion*; full text in the book: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0HNR6KX5Q.

1. Introduction

Part I asks the question every theory of emotion must answer before it measures, models, or treats anything: what is an emotion? Philosophers and scientists have argued over it for more than two millennia. Plato set desire and spirit against reason,[1] and William James held that emotion consists in the feeling of bodily change.[2] Contemporary theorists still divide emotion among affect, feeling, appraisal, judgment, construction, and social meaning.[3] As Fehr and Russell put it, “Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition.”[4]

The problem space is the definition of affective states. The scope is narrow. Part I does not offer a definition of emotion. It uses two accounts of pleasure, the Distinctive Feeling View and the Attitudinal View, as diagnostic test cases, and from their collision it states the conditions any adequate definition must meet.[5]

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In the book's words, "We do not lack evidence. We do not lack theories. We lack a stable ontology of affective states."[6] Without identity conditions, researchers can describe, measure, and classify, yet still fail to identify the object they claim to study.[7]

Emotions steer how people act and judge, and engineers now build machines that claim to read emotions off faces.[8] If the object is undefined, such claims yield, in the book's phrase, "confidence without identity."[9]

The aim is to set the standard every definition of emotion must meet before proposing one: three definitional rules and the requirement of a self-governing agent.

Part I neither picks a winning theory nor merges the rivals. It keeps what each account of pleasure gets right, rejects what each reduces, and turns their failures into constraints on definition. It also begins the book's "Metamorphosis of an Ontology," a sequence of provisional declarations that later Parts refine into fixed identity conditions.

This summary is written for philosophers of emotion and mind, affective neuroscientists and social and affective neuroscientists, emotion-AI and affective-computing researchers, and general readers who want to know what they are asking when they ask what they feel.

2. Method

The book's formal tests arrive after Part I. Chapter 2 separates definition principles, which "fix the identity conditions, integrity, and objectivity of a concept," from analytic validity principles, which "determine what reason can and cannot assert once definitions fix identity conditions."[10] Chapter 7 adds the Foundational Cognitive-Semiotic Principle and the Computational Principles, and validity tables appear in later Parts. Part I applies none of these formally. It works one level earlier: it tests two rival accounts against everyday cases (warmth after cold, effort judged worthwhile, a smile, a crying infant) and cited research, and it derives the negative constraints that Chapter 2′s definition principles later formalize. Throughout, this summary keeps apart analytic propositions (valid by virtue of their definitions), logical truth, logical validity (a property of arguments), and analytic validity (what follows from fixed definitions alone).

3. Two Accounts of Pleasure

The Distinctive Feeling View holds that pleasure is a feeling with a distinctive hedonic tone.[11] The Attitudinal View holds that pleasure is a favorable evaluative stance toward an experience.[12] Each treats one feature of pleasure as the foundation of affective life and extends it to feeling and emotion generally.

Part I treats pleasure as "a diagnostic test case rather than the foundation of affective ontology."[13] Against both views, the book holds that no single feature can stand for the whole. Emotion "requires an architecture capable of integrating body, feeling, evaluation, meaning, and agency while preserving the distinct role of each."[14]

4. Terms and Provisional Declarations

- **Ontology.** "By ontology, I mean the identity conditions and category structure that determine what kind of thing an affective state is and what distinguishes one kind from another."[15]
- **Self-governing agent.** "a person in command of their own mind, what I call a self-governing agent: someone who feels a change, interprets what it means, and holds that meaning to the standard of reason."[16]
- **Phenomenological experience** (provisional). "I now provisionally declare that the phenomenological experience is a conscious idea that bears a distinctive affective character."[17]

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- **Evaluative orientation** (provisional). "I now provisionally declare that the evaluative orientation is a cognitive disposition directed toward the phenomenological experience."[18]

The book uses "phenomenological experience" and "evaluative orientation" rather than "feeling" and "emotion" at this stage, because naming them feeling and emotion at the outset "would prejudge the very ontology the inquiry is intended to ground."[19]

Key propositions:

1. A part is never the whole: no definition may confuse a component with the whole.
2. Evidence is not identity: faces, brain signals, and reports indicate emotion but cannot define it.
3. A name is not understanding: a label cannot replace the reality it names.
4. An emotion requires a self-governing agent.
5. Emotional meaning depends on ideas, so emotion cannot be defined before ideas are.

5. Three Definitional Rules

The Distinctive Feeling View rightly preserves the immediacy and first-person character of feeling: an agent stepping from winter cold into warmth does not reason their way to pleasure. But "a feeling cannot interpret itself; warmth cannot tell you what it means."[20] The Attitudinal View rightly preserves object-directedness, reasons, and standards: an agent who pushes through a hard task and judges the result worthwhile takes pleasure in that outcome. But "approval cannot explain why approval feels like anything at all."[21] The book sums up the collision: "Uninterpreted feeling yields perception without identity; ungrounded judgment yields identity without perception."[22]

Rule 1: a part is never the whole. An agent can want what they do not like and reject what they enjoy. Research on incentive salience separates wanting from liking because motivational drive and hedonic enjoyment do not always coincide.[23] Any theory that fuses them into one pleasure signal cannot explain motivation, value, or internal conflict.[24]

Rule 2: evidence is not identity. The same facial movement can arise from different inner conditions, and different movements can express the same state; a smile can come from joy, politeness, or strategy.[25] Infants and nonhuman animals show attraction, aversion, and distress before reflective judgment,[26] but observation alone cannot settle whether that is affect, feeling, or proto-emotional meaning. Chapter 11 returns to that question. Measurement gains authority when its object has stable identity conditions.[27]

Rule 3: a name is not understanding. Ordinary emotion words preserve lived experience and cultural practice,[28] but "If I define anger as the feeling people call anger, I have not defined anger; I have merely renamed the problem."[29] Culture can intensify, redirect, or regulate emotion, but it cannot bear the whole burden of ontology.[30] The book notes that Mesquita, Boiger, and De Leersnyder do not claim that culture alone defines emotion; its argument targets that stronger thesis.[31]

The three rules fix what a definition must not do: "I cannot confuse a component with the whole, evidence with identity, or naming with knowing."[32] What remains is the requirement of integration: bodily affect, conscious valuation, and agentic interpretation, none of which defines emotion alone.[33] And because an agent cannot fear danger as danger without a concept of danger, "If ideas lack stable identity, emotional meaning cannot possess stable identity."[34]

6. Objection and Reply

One objection is that the rules make emotion science impossible. If faces, neural activations, and reports cannot define emotion, and ordinary usage cannot either, then empirical research has nothing to work with, and the demand for a definition before measurement puts philosophy in the way of data.

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The rules do not discard evidence; they reject its promotion from evidence to definition. In the book's words, "This critique does not condemn empirical science; it disciplines it," and "Data can refine or test a definition, but data cannot substitute for one."[35] This matches the measurement point that a test is valid only if the attribute it measures exists and produces variation in the measurement.[36] Fixing identity conditions first is what lets data count as evidence of emotion rather than of something else. The rules treat signs, expressions, and measurements "as evidence to interpret, not realities to obey."[37]

7. Conclusion

Part I solves a prior problem: what any definition of emotion must preserve before it can be offered. Pleasure, the usual starting point, divides into features no single account can absorb. The collision of the Distinctive Feeling View and the Attitudinal View yields three rules (a part is never the whole, evidence is not identity, a name is not understanding) and a demand for integration: "Emotion demands an ontology that preserves distinction without fragmentation and integration without collapse."[38] Because emotions stand on ideas, Part I ends on the question that opens Part II: what, exactly, is an idea?

The full argument, with its cases, notes, and the first stage of the Metamorphosis of an Ontology, is in Part I of *How to Design an Emotion*, available for pre-order on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0HNR6KX5Q

Notes

1. Moline, "Plato on the Complexity of the Psyche."
2. James, "What Is an Emotion?"
3. Gross and Barrett, "Emotion Generation and Emotion Regulation."
4. Fehr and Russell, "Concept of Emotion Viewed from a Prototype Perspective," 464.
5. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
6. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
7. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD. On identity conditions, see Guarino and Welty, "Evaluating Ontological Decisions with OntoClean."
8. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
9. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
10. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 2, page TBD.
11. Bramble, "The Distinctive Feeling Theory of Pleasure."
12. Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire."
13. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
14. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
15. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
16. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
17. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, "The Metamorphosis of an Ontology," page TBD.
18. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, "The Metamorphosis of an Ontology," page TBD.
19. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, "Methodology of an Ontology," page TBD.
20. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
21. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
22. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
23. Berridge and Kringelbach, "Pleasure Systems in the Brain."
24. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
25. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD. Compare Ekman, "An Argument for Basic Emotions," with Barrett et al., "Emotional Expressions Reconsidered."
26. Berridge, "Measuring Hedonic Impact in Animals and Infants."
27. Borsboom, Mellenbergh, and van Heerden, "The Concept of Validity."
28. Mesquita and Frijda, "Cultural Variations in Emotions."
29. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD. On circular definition, see Gupta, "Remarks on Definitions and the Concept of Truth."
30. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
31. Mesquita, Boiger, and De Leersnyder, "The Cultural Construction of Emotions." See also Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
32. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.

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33. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD. Compare Scherer, "What Are Emotions? And How Can They Be Measured?"
34. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD. Compare Lindquist, Satpute, and Gendron, "Does Language Do More Than Communicate Emotion?"
35. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
36. Borsboom, Mellenbergh, and van Heerden, "The Concept of Validity."
37. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.
38. Cézjah, *How to Design an Emotion*, chap. 1, page TBD.

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