

# New theory of emotions

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unimaginable. Although emotions are so important, philosophers are still discussing what they actually are. Prof. Dr. Albert Newen and Dr. Luca Barlassina of the Institute of Philosophy II at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum have drawn up a new theory. According to this, emotions are not just special cases of perception or thought but a separate kind of mental state which arises through the integration of feelings of bodily processes and cognitive contents. They describe the model in the journal "*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*".

## Earlier theories of emotion

Around the turn of the 20th Century, the [psychologists](#) William James and Karl Lange proposed that emotions are nothing other than perceptions of bodily states. According to the James-Lange theory, we do not tremble because we are scared, but rather we are scared because we tremble. "This theory does not, however, consider the cognitive content of many emotions", says Albert Newen. If a student is anxious about an exam, then he is experiencing this anxiety because he thinks, for example, that the exam is important and that he will have a [blackout](#). The so-called "[cognitive theory](#) of emotions" therefore says that emotions are essentially an assessment of the situation based on reason: this dog is dangerous because he is baring his teeth. "This theory is also unsatisfactory", says Newen, "because it forgets the feelings as a central component of the emotion." A person can realistically judge that a dog is dangerous and at the same time have no fear because he is an expert in handling dangerous dogs. So the cognitive assessment does not necessarily determine the emotion.

## **Integrative embodiment theory of emotions**

Bochum's philosophers call their new model the "integrative embodiment theory of emotions." The [emotional level](#) is – as postulated by William James – the central starting point. An emotion only comes into existence, however, when the perception of bodily states is integrated with other aspects. The brain has to combine at least two components here: the perception of our own bodily states in a given situation, for example trembling, and the intentional object, such as the dog, which triggers the fear. Moreover, in "cognitive" emotions, typical thought content can also play a role, for example, with regard to a bull terrier: "bull terriers are particularly strong and dangerous." The result is a separate kind of mental state, namely an emotion that we conceive as a complex pattern of distinctive characteristics.

## **Emotions for things that do not even exist**

According to Newen and Barlassina, the new theory is also superior to Jesse Prinz's most sophisticated theory of emotions so far, because this does not take into account that an emotion can also be directed at an object that is not present or does not even exist. A case study: Karl goes with his girlfriend Antje to a new bar. Because Karl has already been served by the barkeeper Fritz, Antje waits alone at the bar. Karl hears that she is insulted, but does not see by whom. He assumes it is Fritz. In the meantime, however, Fritz has left the room and John, an employee, is at the bar. He passes the insult and then leaves immediately. When Karl comes to the bar to vent his anger at the insult, Fritz is back. Karl is angry with Fritz although the cause of his bodily states associated with the feeling of anger was the utterance by John. The cause, John, and the object of the anger, namely Fritz, do not coincide. The object of anger is also known as the intentional object of anger, because it does not have to exist. People can even experience emotions about things that aren't real,

for example, fear of vampires. While all feeling theories of emotion overlook the intentional object as an essential part of the emotion, the cognitive theories do tend to forget the feeling dimension of the emotion. Only the integrative embodiment theory takes all these components into account as constitutive of the emotion.

**More information:** *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, [DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12041](https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12041)

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