Title: Emotional Experience and the Senses

Presenting Author: Lorenza D'Angelo

Author(s): Lorenza D'Angelo, Syracuse University

Abstract:

Sensory perception is a paradigmatic type of conscious experience, and most theories of consciousness are designed to account for it. However, many of these theories are ill-equipped to account for other varieties of experience. Thus, a common approach in philosophy of mind and cognitive science seeks to reduce all conscious experience to the sensory, including emotional experience. I call this approach ‘restrictivism’ and argue against it.

I begin by providing a criterion for distinguishing the sensory from the non-sensory. I then present two arguments for the view that emotional experience is partly non-sensory. My first argument has an empirical and epistemological basis. Sometimes I know what emotion I am experiencing without inference or observation, simply by being acquainted with it. But current empirical evidence suggests that the sensory constituents of emotion are insufficient to individuate basic emotion types and are therefore inadequate to ground such knowledge. So restrictivism implies, falsely, that knowledge of emotion by acquaintance is impossible.

My second argument relies on the experience of valence. Although we are still mostly in the dark about what valence is and how it works, it is nonetheless apparent –even to restrictivists– that it is not a feature of our psychology which can be understood by appeal to sensation or perception alone. Given this, restrictivists must deny that the valenced character of emotional experience can be experientially felt, and this is implausible. I conclude by discussing two popular restrictivist strategies, often deployed to address similar problems, and explaining why they do not succeed.