

Cannon-Bard Theory: Why Emotions Hit Us All at Once

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The Cannon-Bard theory, also known as the thalami theory, is a theory of emotion developed by physiologists Walter Cannon and Philip Bard, suggesting that individuals experience emotions and physiologically react simultaneously. These actions include changes in muscular tension, perspiration, etc. This theory challenges the James-Lange theory of emotion introduced in the late 19th century, which suggests that emotion results from one's "bodily change," rather than the other way around.

The theory sparked much controversy in cognitive circles due to its suggestion that emotion lacks a mechanism, and many theorists attempted to provide explanations of emotion that suggested a mechanism. One such theory was provided by Schachter & Singer's two factor theory of emotion, in which they posited that emotion is the cognitive interpretation of a physiological response. For many, this remains the best formulation of emotion.

Example

"I see a man outside my window. I am afraid. I begin to perspire."

The Cannon-Bard Theory of Emotion is based on the premise that one reacts to a specific stimulus and experiences the corresponding emotion simultaneously. Therefore, if one is afraid of heights and is traveling to the top of a skyscraper, they are likely to experience the emotion of fear. Subsequently, the perception of this emotion (fear) influences the person's reaction to the stimulus (heights). Cannon and Bard posited that one is able to react to a stimulus only after experiencing the related emotion and experience. The emotion in which it goes into the brain.