

## **Affective Perception: How the Emotions Justify Evaluative Beliefs**

Madeleine Ransom

*Abstract:* Picasso's Guernica is jarring. Poisonous snakes are frightening. Setting fire to and torturing a cat for fun is morally wrong. What, if anything, justifies such ascriptions of evaluative properties, and our corresponding evaluative beliefs? One increasingly popular proposal, the affective perception view, is that our evaluative beliefs are justified by our emotional experience in much the same way that our perceptual experiences provide us with justification for perceptual beliefs. Recently however, this view has been criticized on the grounds that emotions cannot justify evaluative beliefs because, unlike perceptual experience, emotional experiences are themselves responses to reasons. In this paper I consider three versions of this objection – the double counting objection, the normativity objection and the mediate justification objection – and argue that all fail. The disanalogy between emotional and perceptual experiences is ill-conceived – either both count as responses to reasons, or both fail to count as such, depending on how one conceives of what it is to respond to a reason. Consequently, emotional experiences can provide prima facie justification for our evaluative beliefs in domains where they are reliable. I conclude by proposing that the reliability of the emotions be interpreted in terms of increased likelihood.

### 1. What is Affective Perception?

Those who adhere to the affective perception model claim that evaluative properties are represented in our experience via the emotions.<sup>1</sup> Here an analogy is often drawn to visual perception: just as our visual perceptual experience represents descriptive properties of objects, so too do our emotional experiences represent the evaluative properties of objects. Further analogies between the emotions and visual perception can be drawn in support. While visual perception possesses a distinctive phenomenology, so too do the emotions – in both cases there is something it is like to have a visual or emotional experience. Just as what we visually perceive is largely not under our control, so too is what we feel, and in both cases features of the environment are typically the cause of our states. Moreover, just as visual perceptions can persist in the face of knowledge that the content of one's experience is an illusion (as with the Muller Lyer lines), so too can emotions linger in the face of contrary belief, such as when one knows that the salamander is harmless but continues to feel fear towards it nevertheless. Such considerations speak against Judgment Theories of emotion – like perceptual experiences, emotional experiences are pre- or non- doxastic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adherents include de Sousa (1987), Charland (1995), Elgin (1996, 2008), Johnston (2001), Doring (2003), Roberts (2003), Zagzebski (2003), McCann (2007), Tappolet (2011) though there are significant differences between their views. For example, both Charland (1995) and Doring (2009) argue that the representational content of emotions is non-propositional. I put aside this complication for the purposes of this paper.

One key motivation for the affective perception view is the hope that it will provide a naturalized epistemology for the realist about values.<sup>2</sup> Affective perception provides a means of addressing J.L. Mackie's (1977) criticism that it is mysterious how we could come to be acquainted with evaluative properties. We come to be acquainted with such properties via the emotions. While the account may be more or less plausible depending on the category of evaluative property being considered and the degree of normative realism one adheres to, it is a start nevertheless. If the affective perception model is correct, then one might reasonably suppose that our emotional experiences are able to provide defeasible justification for our evaluative beliefs, just as our sensory perceptual experiences provide justification for our perceptual beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

However, several doubts have been raised about this account.<sup>4</sup> A recent criticism derives from Michael Brady (2011), who argues that emotions do not provide justification for evaluative beliefs, contrary to appearances.

## 2. The Double Counting Objection

While Brady grants that in certain cases our emotional experiences are reliably correlated with evaluative properties – one may reliably feel fear in the presence of poisonous snakes, for example – he nevertheless argues that such experiences are mere 'proxies' for the reasons provided by the emotion-relevant features of the object. Emotion-relevant properties or features of objects may be thought of as those that evaluative properties supervene on. They are also what, on Brady's picture, justify both our emotional experiences and our evaluative beliefs. This is because unlike perceptual experiences "emotions can be responses to features of objects or events which constitute reasons for those responses, and hence to which a subject will respond emotionally insofar as they are rational," (139). We frequently speak of our emotions as being (ir)rational or (un)justified responses to objects or states of affairs, as responses that are more less warranted or intelligible. This supports the view that our emotional experiences themselves are in need of justification, and it is the emotion-relevant properties that provide such justification. However, since our evaluative beliefs are justified by the exact same emotion-relevant properties that justify our emotional experiences, to count our emotional experiences as justifying reasons for evaluative beliefs on top of the emotion-relevant features would be to engage in an illicit form of double counting. Compare: you form a belief that P on the basis of evidence E. Your belief that P is not then typically taken to be further evidence that P. Rather, E does all the justificatory work. In a parallel fashion, the emotion-relevant features

---

<sup>2</sup> I intend realism here to be taken in the broadest sense, only excluding the skeptic who denies that our world contains any items of value, no matter the proposed nature of the evaluative properties. So neo-sentimentalists and response dependent theorists about values count as realists here. While Mackie's criticism may be less pressing for those so naturalistically inclined, they must nevertheless also offer some plausible account of the epistemic access we have to such properties, and the emotions offer a compelling avenue of pursuit.

<sup>3</sup> I take no stance here on how perceptual experience justifies perceptual belief.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Sillins (forthcoming), Whiting (2012), Deonna & Teroni (2008), Brady (2010, 2013).

are what do all the justificatory work, rather than the emotional experience itself. To count the emotional experience as a further source of justification for one's evaluative belief would be to engage in double counting.<sup>5</sup>

The Double Counting Objection thus crucially rests on a purported disanalogy between perceptual and emotional experiences: unlike perceptual experiences, emotions are responses to reasons. The idea here is that while it makes little sense to speak the presence of an object as a reason to perceive it, it does make sense to speak of the presence of emotion-relevant features of objects as reasons to have emotional experiences. The fact that the snake is poisonous and aggressive is a reason to fear it, whereas it is awkward, if not downright misguided, to speak of the fact that the snake is in one's field of vision as a reason to see it. Either one sees it or one doesn't.

As additional fodder for the disanalogy, take the case of perceptual illusions. When someone has a perceptual experience of the two lines in the Muller Lyer illusion as being of different lengths, though they believe them to be of the same length, one typically does not claim that their perceptual experience is irrational. The emotional analogue is that of 'recalcitrant emotions,' where one's emotional experience persists in the face of a conflicting evaluative judgment. For example, one may experience a salamander as being frightening while nevertheless believing that it is harmless. In cases such as these, unlike in the case of perceptual illusions, we judge (as the agent herself may admit, while continuing to feel fear) that the fear is irrational. The salamander does not really possess the property of being dangerous (or frightening), and so one ought not to feel fear. What best explains our differing tendencies, Brady argues, is that the emotional experiences themselves are responses to reasons. However, one might question whether we ought to accept the purported disanalogy, and it is to this question that we now turn.

### 3. Uniting Perceptual and Emotional Experience

There are two main strategies for denying the purported disanalogy and uniting perceptual and emotional experience. First, one might argue that emotional experiences are not in fact responses to reasons, and so remain analogous to perceptual experiences. Second, one might argue that perceptual experiences are responses to reasons, and so remain analogous to emotional experiences. One way of motivating the first strategy is to press Brady on an ambiguity concerning what it means to respond to a reason. If one takes a

---

<sup>5</sup> Goldie (2004) appears to hold this view as well. On his view, whether our ascriptions of evaluative properties are justified depends on the same facts that render our emotional experiences justified. Our experience of the feeling of disgust towards the meat, along with our ascription of the evaluative property of being disgusting, both epistemically depend on whether the meat possesses certain non-evaluative properties, such as being maggot infested. So on this picture, as on Brady's, it is the underlying non-evaluative facts that render both our emotional experiences and our evaluative judgments justified.

response to reasons to require that one intellectually grasp or recognize something as a reason, then insofar as at least some emotions are relatively informationally encapsulated and rely on subpersonal, automatic stimulus detection mechanisms, to speak of them as responding to reasons may be stretching the meaning of the terms. Given that we share our basic emotional responses with other species, it is implausible to require intellectual grasp of some fact as a reason in order to be able to respond to it.

One might further argue that while we sometimes speak and act as if our emotions were responses to reasons, in fact this talk is largely figurative, a rational reconstruction of an arational process. Strictly speaking it is false to talk of experiences themselves as rational or irrational. Insofar as they are sub- or non-doxastic processes, they are exempt from rational appraisal – rather, such talk is properly reserved for beliefs, actions and desires. However, utterances of this type can nevertheless be productively interpreted: when one says that it is irrational to feel fear towards the harmless salamander, this is simply a way of affirming that one does not have ‘all-in’ justification for the evaluative belief that the salamander is dangerous, or that one has a defeater for the belief.

To further the first strategy, one might distinguish between our emotions being responses to reasons and our emotions being responsive to reasons. While Brady requires the first to build his case, he succeeds in establishing only the second. As an example of how our emotional experiences can be responsive to reasons, imagine you see a man stealing an old lady’s purse, which causes you to become angry and pursue the culprit. Learning that you are the subject of a Just For Laughs prank may cause your anger to dissipate. Arguably, you have recognized the fact that it is just a prank as a reason not to be angry at the ‘thief’, and your anger is responsive to that reason. However, this does not establish that the formation of your anger is itself due to a response to reasons. To illustrate this point, and to further weaken the disanalogy, consider this (modified) example from Doring (2009). Imagine you are sitting on a motionless train and another train passes by in the opposite direction. In such a case, you will likely experience the train you are on as moving, though it is in fact stationary. The perceptual illusion does not persist, however, when you realize that the train is still motionless, perhaps by noticing the lack of vibration, or looking out the window on the other side. Like your anger, the illusion dissipates, and this is arguably a case where one’s perceptual experience is responsive to reasons, though not itself a response to reasons. So the disanalogy doesn’t go through: neither emotional nor perceptual experiences qualify as responses to reasons in this sense.

However, suppose one instead denies that responding to reasons requires intellectual grasp of the fact in question as a reason. One may respond to reasons without recognizing them as such. This then leaves the door open for the second strategy: like emotional experiences, perceptual experiences are also responses to reasons, and so the disanalogy is again compromised. The strategy can be expanded as follows. According to Parfit (2011),

facts provide reasons when they count in favor of having some belief, desire, or performing some action. To respond to a reason is to be aware of such reason-giving facts and respond appropriately, for example by forming the belief we have reason to form. On this account one must only be aware of the relevant fact – one need not be aware of it *as* a reason – so no intellectual grasp is required. Since it is the facts themselves that give us reasons, however, why not allow that the fact that the bear is standing in one’s visual field (unobstructed, in suitable lighting conditions, etc.) is a reason for having a perceptual experience of it? We might simply add that facts give us reasons when they count in favor not just of our having certain beliefs but also experiences. On this revised picture, our perceptual experiences would count as responses to reasons. But such a revision is likely to be met with resistance. There is a long historical tradition of viewing perceptual experience as an arational state that provides the epistemic foundation for perceptual beliefs, and such a revision threatens this picture. In what follows I consider several ways of resisting the revision, and argue that all fail.

#### 4. Objections and Replies

One might object to characterizing perceptual experiences as responses to reasons on the grounds that our perceptual experiences are the result of a brute causal process (Fodor 1975), whereas our emotional experiences are like beliefs in that they are the result of a rational process. However, recently Siegel (2013) has argued that the etiology of perceptual experience is in fact rationally assessable – the way in which our perceptual experiences are formed can serve to ‘downgrade’ or establish their epistemic status. She argues this by undercutting three common distinctions between the processes by which our perceptual beliefs and perceptual experiences are formed, which are thought to form the basis of causal-rational distinction. While the paradigmatic case of belief formation is one in which an agent consciously deliberates in order to arrive at a belief, Siegel points out that many beliefs are not formed via explicit reasoning, that we’re not always conscious of the processes by which our beliefs are formed, and that much belief formation is the result of an automatic process.<sup>6</sup> Given that none of these factors prevent us from rationally assessing the etiology of our beliefs, then why should we resist assessing the etiology of our perceptual experiences in the same way? That our perceptual experiences are formed automatically without explicit reasoning or conscious awareness is insufficient to deny them rational assessment.

One might remain skeptical – a principled distinction between the processes underwriting perceptual experience and belief may yet be drawn. In this spirit, Drayson (draft) invokes Searle’s distinction between dynamic and deep unconscious states to argue against Siegel: whereas belief-forming processes are only dynamically unconscious, such as

---

<sup>6</sup> Parfit (2011) concurs on this point: “We could seldom choose not to believe what we have such decisive reasons to believe [...] Our being rational consists in part in our responding to such reasons or apparent reasons in these non-voluntary ways. We can be asked why we believe something, or want something, and we can often give our reasons” (48).

Freudian beliefs, hopes and desires, the processes that generate perceptual experiences are part of the deep unconscious, such as Marr's edge detectors. Though the former is in principle the kind of thing that could be accessible to consciousness, the latter is not.

Of course, the process by which we form our perceptual experiences is consciously accessible via scientific discovery (likewise for belief), but this isn't at issue here. The kind of access required for both beliefs and experiences is internal. But what exactly is supposed to be in-principle-accessible in the case of belief formation? Not brute causal mechanisms, but rather implicit reasoning processes.<sup>7</sup> For example, one may come to have the belief that it is raining outside upon seeing someone entering the room with a dripping wet umbrella, and inferring that they had just come from outside. Though one does not as a matter of fact consciously experience the inferential process, one can rationally reconstruct it, perhaps via reverse engineering or drawing upon the relevant memories. It is in principle accessible to consciousness because it is a process of the same kind that we sometimes do consciously engage in.

One problem for this distinction is that while it is plausible that many beliefs are formed via implicit reasoning, it is less plausible that all beliefs are so formed. First, consider perceptual beliefs. These beliefs are arguably largely automatically derived from perceptual experience – perhaps via a purely computational process – without the need for implicit reasoning of any sort. Though one might rationally reconstruct the process, this does little to bolster the case for a distinction between perceptual experience and belief. To see why, consider a rational reconstruction of the perceptual belief formation process: my perceptual experiences are overall reliable; I have no reason to mistrust them in this case; therefore, my current perceptual experience is reliable (and a good foundation for my perceptual beliefs). The problem is that an analogous rational reconstruction is available for the process by which perceptual systems gives rise to perceptual experience: my perceptual systems are overall reliable; I have no reason to mistrust them in this case; therefore, the information these systems are currently providing is reliable (and a good foundation for my perceptual experience). So the ability to rationally reconstruct a process doesn't entail that it is the result of implicit reasoning, and we have reason to suspect that not all our beliefs are the result of either explicit or implicit reasoning processes.

Moreover, there is a growing psychological literature that points towards a marked human tendency to confabulate justificatory stories (for a review see Carruthers (2011) ch. 11). We sometimes construct post-hoc rationalizations that are incongruous with the prior implicit reasoning process, if any such prior process underlies the belief at all. In such cases, the process by which we really arrived at our beliefs remains opaque to us. For example,

---

<sup>7</sup> Drayson (draft) takes this to be an additional distinction between perceptual experience and belief: whereas the former is the result of a purely computational process, the latter involves at least implicit reasoning. I treat this here as only one distinction – the process is in principle consciously accessible and the reason why it is accessible is because it is an implicit reasoning process.

subjects asked to choose which they prefer in a row of four (unbeknownst to them) identical panty hose exhibit a tendency to choose the pair on the right, thought to be the result of a right-hand attention bias. However, when asked to explain how they made the choice, subjects cited reasons such as that the pair looked the softest (Nisbett & Wilson (1977)). One might think that this doesn't undermine the claim that such beliefs are the result of implicit reasoning, as we may just be mistaken about the reasoning process by which we arrive at the belief that the pair of panty hose on the right is the best. However, in light of such findings, it remains an open question to what degree at least some of our beliefs are the result of implicit reasoning at all. Therefore, one might be cautious in invoking implicit reasoning as the distinction between the processes that underlie perceptual experiences and beliefs. If it cannot underwrite the distinction, then again it looks like there is no barrier to taking our perceptual experiences to be responses to reasons, and emotional experiences and perceptual experiences once again are on a par.

A final more direct attempt at distinguishing emotional and perceptual experiences invokes the 'ought implies can' principle: emotional but not perceptual experiences can be modified based on rational reflection and feedback, so only the first is subject to normative constraints and assessment, and thus properly thought of as a response to reasons. By learning that my friend's dog is harmless, I may not feel fear the next time I encounter the dog. So there continues to be a sense in which emotional but not perceptual experiences are rationally assessable. However, this disanalogy is undermined as soon as one grants that perceptual experience has high-level contents.<sup>8</sup> If part of perceptual experience is to see things as under a given category or concept, and at least some categories or concepts are learned, then perceptual experience can be modified with learning, and so this cannot be the basis for a disanalogy with emotional experience. The learning of simple facts – such as the names or functions of objects – provides us with reasons to see or experience them as these objects.<sup>9</sup>

So Brady's disanalogy fails to stand up in both directions: depending on the conditions one puts on what it is to respond to a reason, either both emotional and perceptual experiences fail, or they both pass. In either case, support for the double counting objection is undermined. But perhaps I have gotten the heart of Brady's objection wrong. In what follows, I consider two modified versions of his objection. First, whereas perceptual experiences provide immediate justification, emotional experiences only provide mediate justification, and so they are disanalogous in this respect. Second, emotional experiences are

---

<sup>8</sup> I mean by high-level contents here any form of seeing that involves bringing an object under a concept. So high level perceptual contents could include not just seeing a pine tree, but 'seeing as' in any form, from seeing collections of shapes and colors as a car or tree, or as one's mother. I take it that those who think perceptual experience can justify perceptual belief are committed to at least 'minimal' high-level contents, or else it remains mysterious how such justification occurs.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the initial pull of the purported disanalogy stems from the fact that our visual learning may be more complete or established at a younger age than our emotional learning. While our perceptual experience is open to modification through learning, we have less occasion to modify it than we do our emotional experience. That is, our perceptual experience is more reliable than our emotional experience, and in need of less modification. Thus it serves little purpose to talk in terms of the rationality of our perceptual experiences, though we could in principle do so.

governed by norms that don't apply to perceptual experiences, and so don't provide justification for evaluative beliefs.

## 5. The Mediate Justification Objection

A first variant on Brady's argument is derived from analyzing what it is to be a response to reasons in terms of mediate justification. Immediate justification is the rock bottom of justification – it is where the epistemic regress ends (and thus commits one to some version of Foundationalism). Justification is epistemically mediated when further reasons can be given to justify the belief (or experience) that justifies another belief. Brady's modified argument might then proceed along the following lines: while emotions can serve as psychologically immediate mechanisms for belief formation, they are epistemically mediated. They depend on further justificatory reasons provided by the instantiation of emotion-relevant properties, whether we are aware of them or not. Again, this is unlike perceptual justification, which provides immediate justification, and so they are disanalogous in this respect.

Notably, the Mediate Justification Objection depends on adopting the view that perceptual experiences can indeed provide immediate justification for their contents.<sup>10</sup> One must then spell out how this occurs. One version of this position is known as Dogmatism – perceptual seemings provide non-inferential justification for perceptual beliefs (see Tucker 2013 for an overview). However, a broader version of the view, Phenomenal Conservatism, allows that seemings in general can be sources of immediate justification: if it seems to S that P, then that seeming provides justification for believing P (absent defeaters).<sup>11</sup> While there are different accounts of what a seeming amounts to, a popular version has it that seemings are experiences (with the content P). A further development of this view is that seemings are sensory experiences. So, one might argue against the mediate justification view of emotional experiences that insofar as emotional experiences are also sensory experiences, then they too are seemings, and so also confer immediate justification.

In order to block this conclusion, one must either provide a principled reason to think that the seemings provided by the emotions are systematically epistemically untrustworthy, or one must provide a reason to think that emotional experiences aren't seemings at all. On the first strategy, one might argue that emotional experiences are unreliable. On the second strategy, one might argue either that the sensory experience view of seemings is mistaken, and that seemings do not provide immediate justification, or that emotional experiences are not sensory experiences. Whiting (2012) provides the foundations of an argument that might be employed by someone pursuing the second strategy: only feelings, not emotions, can

---

<sup>10</sup> Proponents of the view include Bealer (2000) and Huemer (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Both Doring (2009) and Oddie (2005) endorse something very close to this view.

form part of our sensory experiences, and feelings underspecify which emotion is at play. In order to have an emotional experience, an additional cognitive component must be included, and so emotional experiences are not sensory experiences proper. Therefore, they are not sensory seemings. Moreover, bodily feelings on their own, which are sensory experiences, don't provide the sort of content required to justify evaluative beliefs. While an in-depth evaluation of this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, I defend the view elsewhere (draft) that emotional experiences are in fact sensory experiences. On this view, emotions are constituted by the multisensory integration of our interoceptive and exteroceptive sensory modalities: affective feelings are represented as being caused by a given object or state of affairs represented via sight, sound, touch, taste or smell; the object is in turn represented in experience as possessing a given evaluative property. If this picture is correct then emotional experiences may be classified as sensory seemings, and they are back in the running as a source of immediate justification.

However, even supposing Brady's argument is successful, it does not show that emotions cannot justify evaluative beliefs – that a source provides only mediate justification does not entail that it is unable to serve as a source of evidence for a belief at all. So this is a weaker conclusion than that which Brady would endorse.

How might emotions provide mediate justification? One potential model comes from considering whether there may be certain evaluative properties that we cannot have full access to. Perhaps they are exceedingly complicated, as one might think is the case with certain aesthetic or moral properties.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps we lack the conceptual resources to make full sense of the visual information provided to us. Charland (1995) argues that emotions make sense of and process information from external stimuli autonomously, regardless of whether we possess the relevant lexical concepts. In cases such as these we have at best partial cognitive access to the emotion-relevant features of the object. As such, emotional experiences may serve as justificatory reasons in much the same way as do scientific instruments designed to detect properties indirectly. That a vapor trail appears in a cloud chamber is a good reason to believe that a photon has passed, for example. Likewise, emotional experiences may provide justificatory reasons by functioning as reliable detectors of properties inaccessible by other means. Such a justificatory story is a familiar one in science, as well as in other cases where visually undetectable or partially detectable phenomena in question are reliably correlated with some indirect means of detection.

To conclude, even supposing that a principled distinction can be made between perceptual and emotional experiences, and that the latter fail to qualify as seemings, this does not discount emotional experiences as potential sources of justification. Mediate justification is

---

<sup>12</sup> I have in mind aesthetic and moral particularism here. Problems coming up with general rules for the successful guidance of aesthetic or moral judgment are well known.

still a form of justification, and at most Brady's modified argument succeeds in showing that emotional experiences provide only mediate justification.

## 6. The Normativity Objection

Another way to interpret the talk of 'reasons responsiveness' is that emotional experiences are governed by norms inapplicable to perceptual experiences. Indeed, Brady provides a separate argument that may be interpreted along these lines. He first acknowledges that a plausible candidate analysis of evaluative properties is that they are response dependent: to say that something is fearful or disgusting, say, is to believe that it is appropriate to feel fear or disgust towards that object. 'Appropriateness' may be thought of in terms of warrant, rationality, or justification. Response dependent properties of this sort thus possess a normative element that goes beyond merely dispositional accounts of properties such as one might ascribe to secondary properties like colors, which hold that something has property X if it is disposed to exhibit that property to perceivers under normal conditions.

Brady then argues that if evaluative properties are response dependent, then emotional experiences cannot provide justification for evaluative beliefs because they would then be 'self-justifying'. He writes, "My fear of the dog, for instance, cannot be a reason to judge that the dog is dangerous, for then my fear would be a reason to judge that fear in these circumstances is appropriate or merited or fitting – and we have good reason to doubt that fear can justify itself in this way" (2011, 144).

However this argument fails if our emotional experiences are reliable. A simple reply is as follows:

1. My emotional experience represents object X as having evaluative property Y
2. My emotional experience is reliable (in circumstances/domains such as these)
3. Therefore, I am *prima facie* justified in believing that object X has evaluative property Y

If our emotions are working as they are supposed to, then they will be appropriately sensitive to (at least some classes of) evaluative properties. And if this is the case, then actually feeling fear or disgust is a very good reason to believe that something is in fact fearful or disgusting. Of course an internalist about epistemic justification would also include a condition that we are aware, or must be able to become aware of the reliability of our emotional experiences. Externalists need posit no such condition. The actual reliability of our emotional experiences would suffice for *prima facie* justification.

Moreover, note that if one adopts an externalist account of justification, then again the disanalogy between perceptual and emotional experience becomes more difficult to

maintain. What epistemically justifies our emotional experiences? That they reliably track emotion-relevant properties. What epistemically justifies our perceptual experiences? If anything, it is that our perceptual apparatus reliably tracks things in the world. However, even supposing that emotions are a potential source of justification, absent defeaters, one may wonder how often the emotions are actual sources of justification.

## 7. Challenge from Reliability

Our perceptual experiences appear at least initially to be much more reliable sources of justification than our emotional experiences. For example, we may, because of some unconsciously held dislike towards someone, find their words of encouragement to possess an undertone of condescension. Or we may, as a result of a very good mood, judge some inferior work of art to be sublimely beautiful. There is a growing body of empirical literature concerning the distorting effects of moods on evaluative judgments that one might point to in support.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, how reliable our emotions are is an open empirical question, one that may be rendered more complicated depending on whether the emotions are always active in the background of our interaction with the world – if they are a constant guiding presence, then perhaps they are a good deal more reliable than one might think. The flagrant cases that we point to as proof of emotion’s unreliability may turn out to be the exceptions to the rule. Moreover, the claim is only that our emotional experiences provide us with defeasible reasons for our evaluative beliefs. Just as, in the case of perception, we may withhold forming a perceptual belief as a result of awareness of some defeater (as in the case of known optical illusions), so we may withhold forming an evaluative belief or judgment as a result of awareness of some distortion in the reliability of our emotions. However, the charge here is that defeaters abound in the emotional case, so while knowledge of evaluative properties may be in principle possible via affective perception, in practice it almost never is.

To further motivate this objection, consider the hypothesized evolutionary function of the emotions.<sup>14</sup> If it is the case that the emotions evolved to get us to perform advantageous actions quickly and efficiently without the need for reasoning, then a picture of how systematic distortions might occur emerges. Take the evaluative property of something’s being dangerous, and suppose that it has a tendency to cause in us a disposition to feel fear. In an environment where the cost of false negatives (failing to detect the presence of a dangerous predator, say) is higher than the cost of false positives (mistakenly taking some non-dangerous object to be dangerous) then the epistemic landscape will be skewed in favor of false positives. That is, we will have a tendency to mistakenly ‘see’ certain non-dangerous objects as dangerous.

---

<sup>13</sup> For an overview, see Kelly (2011).

<sup>14</sup> See Cosmides and Tooby (1990).

The first thing to note is that the level of skew will be within reason. It would be maladaptive for an organism to generate false positives beyond a certain level (cf. Stephens 2001). An organism could not function adaptively if it attributed the property of being dangerous to virtually all objects and states of affairs. So while the rate of false positives (or in some cases, false negatives, depending on the relative cost and benefit of detection) may be significant in some cases, it nevertheless won't be a rate so high as to inspire complete skepticism about the ability of our emotions to provide us with information about the world.

A second reply against the skeptic is that, though the rate of false positives may be high for some emotions, they nevertheless count as providing *prima facie* justification. This is because it arguably is rational to act on the 'better safe than sorry' principle in certain high stakes situations. The kind of high stakes situations here involve a high potential cost to the organism for failing to act, and a significant time constraint for carrying out the action. Crudely put, the organism that waits for more justification to flee upon hearing a rustling in the bushes close by may end up as some predator's dinner. So it would appear that, though certain emotions may systematically provide a high degree of false positives, one may nevertheless be justified in taking one's emotional experience as a reason for action.

One might object here that in such cases emotional experiences provide merely pragmatic, as opposed to epistemic justification, or that the agent's actions are merely prudentially rather than epistemically rational. While a potential line of response involves questioning the viability of such distinctions, instead I will consider briefly here whether adding a probabilistic component to the information our emotions provide us with may increase their accuracy. It may be that our emotional experiences are accurate insofar as they represent merely the heightened probability of the instantiation of evaluative properties, such as danger. The idea here is that emotions provide us with relatively coarse-grained information. They alert us to increased likelihoods of the presence of threats or benefits. So, for instance, when I feel fear walking alone through a darkened parking lot, my fear is accurate (and so provides *prima facie* justification for the evaluative belief that I may be in danger) insofar as this is a situation where I am more vulnerable to attack in that location than at many other times: there are no sources of help or witnesses around at night; thieves strike more often at night than in daylight, etc. The upshot of adding a probabilistic component is that emotional experiences are accurate far more often than previously supposed, and so skepticism isn't warranted. Take the case of an agent who feels fear towards what she knows is a harmless garter snake. Her emotional experience of fear would still qualify as accurate because many snakes are venomous.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Many questions remain: is the likelihood here objective or subjective? (Presumably it must be objective to avoid circularity.) How does one avoid a too permissive view whereby all our emotional experiences are accurate? Is the likelihood in many cases indexed to category membership (such as natural kind)? If so, what is the right level of category? What to say about the likelihood of states of affairs being dangerous, such as the parking lot?

Finally, the best confirmation of reliability we will get, on an individual level, may be via a cognitive calibration process: one comes to learn whether one's emotional experiences in different domains are reliable by engaging in rational reflection, or checking to see whether there are defeaters or other potentially confounding factors present. This allows an agent to increase the reliability of her emotions by 'training them up,' or at least to become more aware of when they are not to be trusted. I take it that Peter Goldie's (2004) virtue-theoretic account of the emotions is a proposal of exactly this sort. That such a process is psychologically feasible is supported by a body of empirical literature on the effect of mood on judgment. Multiple studies have found that making salient to subjects potentially distorting factors, such as the weather or external stressors, causes judgments (such as estimates of life satisfaction or risk assessment) to return to statistically normal levels.<sup>16</sup> This supports a view whereby affect can continue to be a reliable source of information in spite of distortions, as long as the subject is aware of the extraneous influences.

Another more general way of discerning the reliability of different domains of evaluative properties is via genealogical analysis. For example, Kelly (2011) provides an empirically grounded account of the origins and function of disgust that he argues undermines the role that emotion might play in moral reasoning. Crudely put, given that the disgust system evolved to allow us to detect and avoid rotten food and parasites, it does not provide trustworthy information about moral evaluative properties – disgust is simply irrelevant to moral debate. While such genealogical debunking strategies are controversial, they may nevertheless prove valuable in identifying problematic domains.<sup>17</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper I have defended the view that emotions can and sometimes do provide reasons for our evaluative beliefs. First, I provide a dilemma for those opposed to this view on the grounds that only emotions, and not perceptions, are responses to reasons: if one takes responses to reasons to require intellectual grasp or recognition of the fact in question as a reason, then it is implausible that emotions are responses to reasons in this sense. If one does not take responses to reasons to require recognition, then it is plausible that perceptions are responses to reasons in this sense. Either way, the disanalogy fails, and perceptual and emotional experience remain united and so the double counting objection is undermined. Second, I consider the argument that while perceptual experiences provide us with immediate justification because they are seemings, the justification that emotional experience provides is epistemically mediated – they do not qualify as seemings. In response I argue that emotional experiences are good candidates for seemings, but that even if this fails they continue to serve as a source of (mediate) justification. Third, I consider the

---

<sup>16</sup> See for example Schwarz & Clore (1983, 2003); Gasper & Clore (2000).

<sup>17</sup> While this argument appears to be committing the genetic fallacy, see Kelly (2011, p.152). For a more general evolutionary argument against realism about moral properties, see Street (2006).

argument that the emotions are governed by extra normative conditions inapplicable to perception, and so are responses to reasons in that they are subject to rational appraisal. In response, I argue that we have good reason to take our actual emotional experiences as prima facie justification for our evaluative beliefs insofar as our emotional experiences are reliable. It is to the question of reliability that I turn in the final section. While our emotional experiences may be more reliable than we expect, this will vary considerably by domain, and one role for empirical science is to help bring to light potentially problematic domains. So while our emotional experiences can provide us with prima facie justification for our evaluative beliefs, their reliability will vary depending on domain.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Murat Aydede, attendees of the UBC Fall 2013 seminar on affect, and those in attendance at the 2014 Society for Philosophy and Psychology Conference for many helpful comments and suggestions on the ideas presented in this paper.

## References

- Bealer, G. (2000) "A Theory of the A Priori." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81: 1–30.
- Brewer, B. (2011) *Perception and Its Objects*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brady, M. (2010) "Virtue, Emotion, and Attention," *Metaphilosophy* Vol. 41, Nos.1-2: 115-131.
- Brady, M. (2011) "Emotions, Perceptions, and Reasons," (ed.) C. Bagnoli, *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 135-149.
- Brady, M. (2013) *Emotional Insight: the Epistemic Role of Emotional Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carruthers, P. (2011). *The Opacity of Mind: An Integrative Theory of Self-Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- Charland, L. (1995) "Feeling and Representing: Computational Theory and the Modularity of Affect," *Synthese* 105 (3): 273-301.
- Conee, E. & Feldman, R. (2001) "Internalism Defended," In H. Kornblith, (ed.) *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Cosmides, L. & Tooby, J. (1990) "The Past Explains the Present: Emotional Adaptations and the Structure of Ancestral Environments," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 11(4-5) 375-424.
- de Sousa, R. (1987) *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Deonna, J. & Teroni, F. (2012) *The Emotions*, New York: Routledge.
- Döring, S. (2003) "Explaining Action by Emotion," *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (211):214-230.
- Döring, S. (2009) "The Logic of Emotional Experience: noninferentiality and the Problem of Conflict Without Contradiction," *Emotion Review* 1 (3): 240-247.
- Drayson, Z. (draft) "Cognitive Penetration: Why do some Top-down Effects Matter More than Others?" presented as a talk at the 2014 SPP in Vancouver.
- Elgin, C. (1996) *Considered Judgment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Elgin, C. (2008) "Emotion and Understanding," (eds) G. Brun, U. Doguoglu, D. Kuenzle, *Epistemology and Emotions*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 33-49.
- Fodor, J. (1975) *The Language of Thought*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gaspar, K. & Clore, G. (2000) "Do you Have to Pay Attention to your Feelings to be Influenced by Them?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26: 698-711.

- Goldie, P. (2004) "Emotion, Reason and Virtue," (eds) D. Evans & P. Cruse, *Emotion, Evolution, and Rationality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 249-67.
- Goldie, P. (2000) *The Emotions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Huemer, M. (2001) *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Johnston, M. (2001), "The Authority of Affect," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1):181-214.
- Kelly, D. (2011) *Yuck! The Nature and Significance of Moral Disgust*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Mackie, J.L. (1977) *Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Pelican Books.
- McCann, H. (2007) "Metaethical Reflections on Robert Audi's Moral Intuitionism," (eds) Timmons, M., Greco, J., and Mele, A.R., *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi*, Oxford University Press.
- Nisbett, R. & Wilson, T. (1977) "Telling More Than we Can Know," *Psychological Review* 84: 231-95.
- Oddie, G. (2005) *Value, Reality, and Desire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. (2011) *On What Matters, Vol I*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ransom, M. (working draft) "Can we Introspect our Emotions? Affective Binding and Transparency"
- Roberts, R.C. (2003) *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schwarz, N. & Clore, G. (1983) "Mood, Misattribution, and Judgments of Well-being: Informative Affective States," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45: 513-523.
- Schwarz, N. & Clore, G. (2003) "Mood as Information: 20 Years Later," *Psychological Inquiry* 14: 296-303.
- Siegel, S. (2013) "The Epistemic Impact of the Etiology of Experience," *Philosophical Studies* 162(3): 697-722.
- Sillins, N. (forthcoming) "The Significance of High-Level Content," in special issue of *Philosophical Studies*.
- Stephens, C.L. (2001) "When is It Selectively Advantageous to Have True Beliefs? Sandwiching the Better Safe Than Sorry Argument," *Philosophical Studies* 105 (2):161-189.

Street, S. (2006) "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127:109-166.

Tappolet, C. (2011) "Values and Emotions," (ed.) C. Bagnoli, *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 135-149.

Tucker, C. (2013) *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, (ed) C. Tucker, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whiting, D. (2012) "Are Emotions Perceptual Experiences of Value?" *Ratio* 25(1): 93-107.

Zagzebski, L. (2003) "Emotion and Moral Judgment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 66 (1): 104-124.