

# How Emotions Grasp Value

Antti Kauppinen

University of Helsinki

Final draft for *Philosophical Issues*, July 5, 2024

It is a widely shared intuition that having an emotional experience can constitute some sort of intimate contact with value. To take a fairly random example, consider the following scenario from the first part of Victor Hugo's *Les misérables*:

## *Last Theft*

Jean is a hardened and embittered ex-convict who has lost his faith in morality after being unjustly convicted to decades of hard labor. When he's finally released, he steals even from a bishop who treats him with kindness and respect. However, the bishop's merciful and trusting response when Jean is caught – he lies to the police that he has in fact *given* the stolen silver to Jean, so that Jean walks away from the crime – shows him that there is after all goodness and hope in the world and sets in motion a gradual moral transformation. However, while he's still in a state of confusion about what kind of person he really is, Jean casually commits one last crime, stealing an orphan boy's only bit of money just because he can, leaving the boy destitute. He knows, of course, that what he's doing is morally wrong and that he has no excuse, but in virtue of his residual anger at the world, he chooses at first to ignore these facts. But just as soon as it is too late to undo the damage, he begins to reflect on the gratuitous harm he has caused in the context of the goodness shown to him by the bishop, and it finally gets to him. Through the night, he lies awake and weeps, tormented by guilt and shame. The wrongness of his action now appears to him “with a clearness which he had never hitherto witnessed” (Hugo 1887, 135).

This scenario illustrates a common phenomenon: we can *believe* or *know* that we're to blame or falling significantly short of an ideal without fully *appreciating* it. It's only when we feel guilt or shame that we genuinely face up to our wrongdoing or shortcoming. The same goes for knowing that someone we loved is gone forever and feeling grief, knowing someone has wronged us and feeling resentment, and so on.

What such transitions suggest is that fitting emotions are necessary for fully grasping the value or disvalue of something. Several people have recently explicitly defended claims in this ballpark, including Laura Callahan (2018), Brian Ballard (2021), Daniel Vanello (2022), Tricia Magalotti (2024) and Uriah Kriegel (forthcoming). But even if we provisionally accept that fitting emotions are necessary for grasping value, there's a further question: *how* and *why* is it that we grasp value through emotion, when we do? Answering this question requires getting clear about the nature of grasping and the nature of emotional experience, and indeed the nature of value itself. That's my project in this paper. Above all, my aim is to present a novel, Stoicism-inspired theory of emotional experience that highlights its directive intentional content and link to action. I argue that such content is the key to emotion's role in phenomenal grasping of value, which is a matter of having the kind of experience whose phenomenal character reveals what it is to be valuable in a particular way.

More precisely, I'll argue that emotional experience directs us both to adopt a maxim for action – take certain characteristic kinds of action for an emotion-specific end – and to treat something about the object as a presumptively decisive reason to take such action for such end. If we don't dissent from what the experience proposes (or if rational control gets bypassed), we are motivated to take the relevant sort of action and have a corresponding evaluative belief. This picture of emotional cognition yields a natural conception of the fittingness conditions of emotions: emotional experience is fitting if and only if we have

presumptively decisive reason to act as the emotion directs us to act. This avoids the problematic assumption that emotions have a presentational phenomenology akin to perception. Instead, I argue that it is precisely in virtue of the directive and valenced phenomenology of emotion that values are only fully manifest in emotional experience, since values are essentially action- and attitude-guiding properties.

On this picture, then, it turns out that the key epistemic role of emotion has to do with a kind of understanding rather than justification. As I'll suggest at the conclusion, phenomenal grasp of value is important, because it functions as a *rationalization-stopper* in deliberation and may be constitutive of *virtue*, since it expresses the right kind of personal orientation to value.

## 1. Grasping and Phenomenology

When philosophers talk about 'grasping' something in thought, they mean some sort of acquaintance with it, "a special kind of representation of that thing, one that is "direct" or that brings with it a familiarity, even an intimacy", as Michael Strevens (2024, 750) puts it. There are many sorts of thing we might be said to grasp: properties, relationships, propositions, states of affairs/facts, explanations, and phenomena or subject matters. While talk of 'grasping' is plausibly simply a synonym for 'understanding' especially towards the end of this list, it can also indicate a special sort of contact between the subject and some aspect of the world, as in the following cases:

Grasping redness, or what it is for something to be red.

Grasping that this tomato is red.

Grasping why tomatoes are red.

In the first case, the object of grasping is the *property* of redness, which may amount to grasping its *essence*. It is what Jackson's (1982) Mary will lack as long as she lives in a black-and-white world, so at least for perceptible properties, it plausibly involves some kind of conscious acquaintance with the property via some of its instances. Pre-release Mary will also have at best a partial grasp of the *concept* of redness, and consequently of *propositions* that involve that concept. I'll assume she will have this partial grasp either in virtue of her inferential abilities – she'll know that being red entail being coloured, that it's a surface reflectance property, and so on – or by way of having a disposition to defer to certain members of her linguistic community when it comes to colour judgments. But she comes to *fully* grasp the proposition *Ripe tomatoes are red* only when she has the relevant experience.

The second sentence concerns grasping a *fact* or *state of affairs*, or the *truthmaker* of a proposition. Importantly, it is possible to believe or even know the truth of a proposition without grasping its truthmaker – Mary can know that a particular tomato in the kitchen is red on the basis of her reading without grasping that fact. As this shows, knowledge and grasp are distinct ways of relating to a state of affairs. As Strevens puts it, “in order for true belief to attain the status of knowledge, it must have a certain degree and kind of security, whereas in order for true belief to attain the status of grasp it must have a certain degree and kind of *perspicacity*” (2024, 750). I take it that grasping a fact requires grasping the relevant properties and relations (among other things), so it is in that sense parasitic on the first kind of grasp. Of course, grasping a property does not suffice for grasping that it is instantiated in a particular scenario – we can very well know that what it is for something to be wrong without recognizing that what we're doing is wrong. At the same time, it's likely that we come to grasp many properties *by way of* grasping states of affairs in which they're instantiated – it's by way of seeing a particular ripe tomato that Mary learns what it is for something to be red.

Finally, the third sentence concerns grasping an *explanation*, or understanding why. It's plausible that it requires knowing why something is the case, but quite likely also something more, such as the ability to recognize what would be the case, were the explanans different in some way (e.g. Grimm 2010, Hills 2015). It may well be that grasping why tomatoes are red requires grasping that certain facts *necessitate* or *make probable* that tomatoes are red. For other kinds of explanations, grasping that *q* is why *p* may require appreciating that *q* *entails* or *justifies* *p* (see O'Brien 2023). While explanatory grasping has been central in debates about moral and other kinds of understanding, I'm going to largely focus on the first two kinds here, since they are more plausibly experiential.

So let's examine grasping properties and propositions more carefully. I started with Jackson's Mary and colour properties, since it is very plausible that in her case, the change from not grasping to grasping happens by way of experience, and in particular experience with a certain phenomenal character. Some philosophers, in particular David Bourget (2017; forthcoming) argue that conscious experience is needed for occurrently grasping propositions in general. His initial proposal for propositional grasping is the following: "Occurrently grasping [proposition] *p* is having *p* as phenomenal content" (Bourget forthcoming, variable modified). As he rightly emphasizes, this is not the view that grasping consists in some special aha!-feeling, or a feeling of understanding. Rather, the view is that "grasping a proposition involves experiencing *it* (the proposition), not some unrelated, generic feeling." (ibid.) In his terminology, we experience a proposition when it's a part of the phenomenal content of our experience. In Bourget's most famous example, you initially merely know that the volume of the Sun is 1.3 million times the volume of the Earth (call this the Volume Relationship). Here you don't experience the proposition. But then you learn that this relationship between the volumes corresponds roughly to the size difference between a basketball and a small apple seed, and either see or visualize it, so that the (approximate)

Volume Relationship is part of the content of your experience. *Now* you grasp the proposition, Bourget says.

There are various moves that defenders of non-phenomenal grasping could make in response to this argument – perhaps, for example, visualizing the content of a proposition is just a tool that improves our inferential ability, and grasp itself consists in the latter.<sup>1</sup> For my purposes, I can remain neutral about this. Instead, a more modest claim suffices. After all, in the Mary case, having the colour experience does seem necessary for fully grasping the property. An alien with a non-phenomenal ability to recognize surface reflectance properties wouldn't grasp what it is to be red – at least not in the phenomenal way in which we can grasp it. And there's some plausibility to the idea that Mary grasps redness when she sees a ripe tomato, even if she, say, falsely believes it's orange. If she also *knows* it's red, there's little question (cf. Kriegel forthcoming). But I won't take a stand on what else might be needed for sufficiency. The thesis that I'm going to assume for the purposes of examining the role of emotion in grasping value is the following:

*Phenomenal Grasping of Properties*

S phenomenally grasps property P only if what it is to be P is manifest in the phenomenal character of S's experience.

(I'll come back to grasping other things in Section 4.) I will also assume that when a property is phenomenally graspable, *fully* grasping it requires also phenomenal grasp. (We could also say that we *can* fully grasp only what we can also phenomenally grasp.) So, there is something it is like for Mary to see a ripe tomato – when she first sees one, she has an experience with a novel phenomenal character. What it is to be red is manifest in this experience – or, as might also say, the quality of the experience reveals the nature of redness

---

<sup>1</sup> For an account of understanding-why that highlights the role of models, see e.g. Dellsen 2020.

to her. At least if she also knows that the tomato is red, she now grasps redness. In the same way, eating spicy food for the first time allows you to phenomenally grasp the property of being spicy, seeing a square object allows you to phenomenally grasp squareness, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Emotional Experience and Action: A Stoic Heritage

I'm provisionally assuming that emotional experience can constitute phenomenal grasp of value. But to understand how it does so, we must next turn to the nature of emotional experience itself. Since I want to make a fresh start, I will not try to go over existing theories at this point – I'll briefly come back to them after laying out my take.

Let's start with the idea that the *raison d'être* of emotions is to *prepare us to act* in response to what happens in our environment. From any naturalistic perspective, we must grant that the evolutionary rationale for affective responses is not *correct representation*, but rather fitness-enhancing action. (Of course, that is not to say that our affective responses are always fitness-enhancing, or that their targets are hard-wired.) This is something that we should also expect to be reflected in their phenomenology, or what-it's-like to have an occurrent emotion. Since the phenomenology and intentional content of conscious experience are closely linked on mainstream views in the philosophy of mind – and here I'm going to be neutral on whether phenomenal character determines content or vice versa<sup>3</sup> – we thus have good prima facie reason to believe that the primary intentional content of emotional experience is action-guiding and not merely representational. I'll argue that other aspects of

---

<sup>2</sup> As the case of squareness shows, we can phenomenally grasp properties whose nature is independent of our experience. But couldn't we in that case fully grasp them non-phenomenally? (I thank Fabrice Teroni for this challenge.) I don't think so – there does seem to be an epistemic difference between our grasp of *being square* and *being a chiliagon* due to our inability to phenomenally discriminate between the latter and nearby shapes, as Gassendi argued against Descartes.

<sup>3</sup> For contrasting views, see e.g. Tye 1995 (for representationalism about the phenomenal) and Mendelovici 2018 (for phenomenal intentionalism).

emotional cognition, in particular motivation, bodily action readiness, and evaluative judgment regarding the object, are default responses to this content.

Perhaps surprisingly, the historical model for this kind of account is the Stoic view of emotional cognition, or at least one plausible interpretation of it. To put it as simply as possible, the Stoics' general epistemological view was that we receive an *impression* (*phantasia*) from our environment, and if we *assent* to it (in a particular way), we form a corresponding *belief*. The ordinary *phantasia* consists in a physiological change that has as its content a proposition or *lekton*, such as "It is daytime". The interpretation I have in mind is that in the practical case, we have a *practical impression*, and if we *assent* to it, we have a corresponding *evaluative belief* and/or *impulse* (*hormê*), which the Stoics themselves plausibly identified with the emotion proper (see especially Inwood 1987). This practical impression (*phantasia hormêtikê*) is sometimes called *propatheia*, or 'pre-passion'. Even a Stoic sage who stands above ordinary passions will have such experiences, as Epictetus notes:

[W]hen some frightening sound from the sky or a collapsing building or the sudden announcement of some danger, or something else of the sort occurs, it is inevitable that even the sage's soul be moved for a short while and be contracted and grow pale, not because he has formed an opinion of anything evil but because of certain rapid and unreflective movements which forestall the proper function of intellect and reason. Soon, though, the sage in question does not give assent... to such presentations ... but rejects and refuses them and judges that there is nothing in them to be feared.

(fragment quoted in Inwood 1987, 177)

Importantly, Michael Inwood holds that for the old Stoics, "one important distinguishing mark of a hormetic presentation [that is, practical impression – AK] is that it is accompanied



by an imperative as well as by a proposition ... [A]ssent to a hormetic proposition is extensionally equivalent to obedience to a self-given imperative” (Inwood 1987, 60, 62). In the following, I will develop this idea of emotional cognition as a sequence roughly like this: imperatival impression → assent (or absence of dissent) → evaluative belief and motivation.<sup>4</sup>

But what exactly is imperatival content? As Luca Barlassina and Max Hayward nicely summarize it, unlike ordinary indicative content that has as its function carrying information and correspondingly has truth conditions, imperative content

1. Has the function of directing its addressee to do something, for example, to F;
2. Has satisfaction conditions: it is satisfied if and only if the addressee Fs;
3. The addressee correctly uptakes it by forming a motivation [to F –AK].

(Barlassina and Hayward 2019: 6)

Imperativist views have recently been presented regarding the positive or negative *valence* of affective experiences, often understood as their pleasant or unpleasant feel. Very roughly, some imperativists hold that valence is constitutively linked with having content that either says *yes* to the way things are perceived to be (prompting us to accept how things are and therefore continue in the same vein) or says *no* to it (prompting us to reject how things are and therefore change them) (Martinez 2011; Kauppinen 2021a). So either fear feels bad in virtue of telling us to reject and therefore change the present trajectory of events, or it tells us to reject and therefore change the present trajectory of events in virtue of how it feels.

Barlassina and Hayward’s (2019) reflexive imperativism has it that valenced experiences say “More of me!” (that is, prompting us to have more of the very experience the command is a part of) or “Less of me!”. It could be that the valence of world-directed feelings (emotions) is

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a dispute among historians about details of the Stoic account (and whether there even is a single one). For a careful recent reading, see Röttig 2022.

explained in the first way and the valence of non-intentional feelings in the second, reflexive way. Or perhaps all negative feelings prompt us to get rid of themselves, but the world-directed ones also prompt us to change the world. In any case, for the purposes of this paper, the imperativist account of valence is only a model – even if valence is explained in some other way, something like imperative content might still be an essential part of emotional experience. I'll next turn to what that would amount to.

### 3 Directivism About Emotional Experience

On the view of emotional (or more broadly affective) experience that I find most plausible, then, the feeling or phenomenal aspect is a 'feeling towards' (Goldie 2000) the object of the emotion in the sense that it has content that directs us to do something with respect to the object, in the way that Stoic 'practical impressions' do. Here talk of 'imperatives' can be misleading, since the key element here is that if you accept your emotional experience at face value, you will be motivated one way or another. The experience might also *invite* or *attract* us. To emphasize this, I'll talk more generally about 'directive content'. (Those who are sceptical of there being such content can instead talk about directive 'force' in the Fregean sense, but what I want to say is more intuitively formulated in terms of content, so I will do so in the following.<sup>5</sup>) Recall that I'm assuming here the view in philosophy of mind that phenomenal character and intentional content are constitutively linked one way or another. So the methodology I'm using involves reflecting on different aspects of the experience and

---

<sup>5</sup> It's good to note that talk of 'content' is ambiguous here. The claim is that we can understand the *phenomenal content* of the experience in two ways that are for my purposes identical. Either we say that the experience has phenomenal content of the directive form, e.g. "See to it that *p*!", or we say that experience has phenomenal content that can be expressed as "Do (*p*)!", where 'Do' is a directive operator whose argument is a regular proposition. The latter is the orthodox Fregean view, according to which "The door is open!" and "Open the door!" have the same propositional content, which has indicative force attached to it in one case and imperative force in the other. My view is that we can express the phenomenal content of experience equally well either way – what matters is that *uptake* of an experience with directive content or of an experience with directive force acting on a propositional content amounts to the same thing, a motivational state. So on the Fregean interpretation, directive force is not an *attitude* toward an experience or the world, but part of the total content of the experience. Thanks to Fabrice Teroni for pressing me on this.

its distinctive functional role in order to identify what kind of content would make best sense of it.

Here's an initial proposal that is based on the action-guiding role of emotional experience:

*Simple Directivism*

The phenomenal character of emotional experiences is constitutively linked with their having directive content (or: their presenting propositional content with a directive force) that prompts the subject to respond to some non-evaluative properties of its object in emotion-type characteristic ways for emotion-type characteristic ends.

So the feeling of fear, for example, tells you to respond to something you believe about a loose gorilla approaching you, say its strength and apparent intentions, by swiftly leaving the scene for the sake of protecting yourself. To be sure, you might not be able to identify the non-evaluative property or properties in question – it could be a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the gorilla that invites departure. But in any case, for Simple Directivism, that the experience calls for either changing or maintaining the way things are going is either what gives it the phenomenal character it has (if representationalism about phenomenology is true) or is the content it has in virtue of the phenomenal character it has (if phenomenalism about intentionality is true). We could say that the emotional experience raises the question about what to do about its object on our deliberative agenda by proposing a particular answer, which is in Kantian terms a potential *maxim* for our agency, such as “escape the situation in order to protect yourself”. Accepting it can then lead to different kinds of concrete action, either instinctively or by way of instrumental reasoning.

For directives to individuate emotional experiences, it is of course necessary that there are characteristic ways of acting (including mental actions) and characteristic ends that are

uniquely associated with different emotions. I won't try to fully defend this assumption here, but I'm optimistic that as long as we're talking about intentional affective states, such ways of acting and ends, however abstract, can be identified, starting from observations about what people tend to do or think about when they are in the grip of an emotion.<sup>6</sup> This seems to be true of paradigm emotions like fear, anger, guilt, and disgust (which may each have several subtypes associated with different but related directives), while it takes some work to articulate them for feelings like sadness or joy. To give a few broadly characterized examples, guilt tells us to make amends in order to repair a moral relationship, shame tells us to hide in order to avoid revealing our falling short of an ideal, grief tells us to dwell on what we've lost in order to keep its object in a central place in our lives, anxiety tells us to engage in risk-minimizing behavior and inquiry into potential threats in order to protect ourselves (Kurth 2016), and so on. Each of these broad act-types and ends can be realized in a multitude of context-dependent ways – for example, hiding in shame might manifest itself in aggression that shifts attention away from the perceived flaw.

Why should we accept Simple Directivism? The first reason is simply that it is phenomenologically plausible. It is very natural to describe especially negative emotional experiences in these terms. Is it not a fitting description of what vengeful anger feels like that it tells you to somehow hurt its object to get even? At the same time, it seems you can be angry without being moved or motivated to harm its object (or, say, protest against it), for example when it's your own small child, it's a fictional character, or you know there's nothing you can do about it. You might read about the horrors of slavery in Haiti in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and feel angry or sad without being motivated to do anything. In such cases, it's not just that your motivation is overridden by some stronger motive – there is no *motivational*

---

<sup>6</sup> This methodology is suggested by Scarantino, whose motivational theory faces the same challenge. See e.g. Scarantino 2014, 180–181.

conflict at all. So there seems to be a *gap* between emotion and motivation. But, I would insist, even in these cases, if you're genuinely angry, your *experience* is *telling* you to do something against the enslavers, *per impossibile* – in Stoic terms, you still have a practical impression that calls for action. But this directive experience is in this case motivationally inert, because all possibility for pertinent action is foreclosed.

While I thus think emotional experience comes apart from motivation, it is at the same time overwhelmingly plausible that there is also an intimate connection: we *are* often motivated to act because of how we feel and may indeed act *out of* emotion. This intimate connection motivates motivational theorists of emotion like Frijda (1986) and Scarantino (2014), who rightly highlight the practical benefits of a deliberation-independent control mechanism. But for this to be the case, emotional experience does not need to *consist* in a motivational state. It suffices that it by default directs or prompts us to act in virtue of its typically hard-to-ignore phenomenal character, and that we can respond to this prompting with motivation. Thus, in the Stoic spirit, Simple Directivism says that while emotional experience *is* not in itself motivational, when we take it at face value – when we *don't dissent* from it – we *will* be motivated independently of other considerations (though there may still be a gap before we actually *act* on the emotion). This, I submit, makes good sense of the default connection between emotion and motivation, in particular if we don't assume that assent or dissent must always be deliberative or rational. To put it the other way around, there does seem to be the phenomenon of yielding to an emotional experience; since this involves being motivated without further ado, the content of the experience must be directive in nature. (To be sure, experience can also motivate us in a way that bypasses assent or dissent – more on that later.)

Now, when we endorse fear, one thing that happens is that we are motivated to flee the situation. But that's not all. We often also believe that the situation is dangerous, even if

we didn't do so before. Related to this, many philosophers have held that emotions seem to present themselves as authoritative or warranted in some way – that part of what it is like to have the emotion is that it presents the action it proposes as *called for* by the object (e.g. Mitchell 2021).<sup>7</sup> Suppose that I'm angry with Reviewer 2. By default, my experience tells me to put Reviewer 2 in his place because he *deserves* it.<sup>8</sup> It is in the light of this that my anger by default *makes sense* to me, unlike a mere urge (Johnston 2001, 189). And Simple Directivism doesn't seem to be able to capture this aspect of the phenomenal character of emotional experience.

There is, however, a straightforward fix that keeps the attractions of the view. The phenomenology of making sense suggests that in addition to the primary, response-guiding directive content, an emotional experience also tells us to *treat* the object's properties as *giving a reason to respond* in the relevant way for the characteristic end. (Here 'us' refers to reflectively aware agents who are able to, or even compelled to, ask themselves whether they should act in the way they're inclined to act – there may well be what we might call 'animal emotions' that lack this sort of content.) In this sense, we could say it makes a claim for the *practical authority* of its grounds.

What is it to treat an object's properties as giving a reason to respond, then? Roughly speaking, it is to endorse being motivated by them, to appeal to them when challenged to justify one's response, and to have them count in favour of the response when deliberating (cf. Kauppinen 2021b). Once we possess normative vocabulary, one way to treat something as a reason for acting is simply *believing* that it is a reason to act. So on this view, the anger

---

<sup>7</sup> Taking an action to be called for is, to be sure, distinct from thinking that the emotion itself is called for. But by default, thinking that the action that an experience calls for is merited involves being disposed to endorse the calling for (that is, the experience) itself, if one has the relevant conceptual resources. If running away makes sense to me, so does having an experience that calls for running away – unless that experience itself prevents me from achieving what it calls for.

<sup>8</sup> Note that this is not the same as saying that the thought that Reviewer 2 deserves to be put in his place must *precede* the anger (though it might). Your anger might be intelligible when you find the target's behavior offensive even if you're not angry *because* you found the behavior offensive (but, say, because of suppressed envy). On this key point, I disagree with Müller 2017.

experience not only tells me to focus on Reviewer 2's shortcomings and to demand him to acknowledge his shoddy treatment of my precious work, but also to treat those shortcomings as a *reason* to demand him to acknowledge his shoddy treatment.

More precisely, I think the nature of this perceived reason reflects the fact that emotions are by design myopic, focusing only on a limited range of considerations: anger couldn't do its job if it stopped calling for adverse treatment of its object whenever it clashes with our overall self-interest (as Frank 1988 famously argued). The way I'll put it is that emotional experiences tell us to treat something about the object as a *presumptively decisive* reason to act in a certain way – as something that needs to be taken up in deliberation and acted on, *unless* there are weighty considerations to the contrary. So, fear not only tells me to focus on the gorilla's strength and apparent intentions and to somehow get away from it in order to protect myself, but also to treat the strength and apparent intentions as presumptively decisive reasons to get away from it in order to protect myself. Importantly, because assent to this directive means treating them as only *presumptively* decisive considerations, it doesn't automatically mean deciding to act accordingly. The point of having rational control is that it allows us to take into account other considerations, such as the long-term consequences of acting on the emotion, our existing commitments, the odds of success, or the demands of morality, and thus potentially refuse to assent to what the feeling proposes.

So let's refine the suggestion. If we work backward from the complex phenomenology of emotional experience to its content, I think the most attractive theoretical articulation of that content is as follows:

#### *Dual Directivism*

The phenomenal character of the emotional experiences of rational animals is constitutively linked with their having *directive* content that prompts the subject to respond to some non-evaluative properties of its object in ways M for ends E that are

characteristic of the emotion type, and *rationalizing* content that directs the subject to treat those properties as giving a presumptively decisive reason to respond in ways W for ends E. If the subject takes the emotion at face value, she will be motivated to respond in ways W and believes there is something about the object that gives a presumptively decisive reason to respond in those ways for ends E.

Now, if you believe that the gorilla's approach merits urgently getting away in order to protect yourself, or that Reviewer 2's conduct merits lashing out in order to restore your proper relative standing, what is it that you believe about the gorilla or the Reviewer? Well, I want to say you believe that the gorilla is dangerous or that the Reviewer has slighted you, as Aristotle would put it. And to do so is to attribute an *evaluative property* to the object, such as the property of being dangerous or offensive. After all, if some behavior is offensive, its non-evaluative properties give a presumptively decisive reason to treat the agent in some unfriendly manner to restore status, and vice versa. (To be sure, this reason could be outweighed or even disabled by other considerations.) It could be that its offensiveness simply consists in this fact, or that its offensiveness is why its properties give such reasons. Either way, there's an internal connection between value and reasons for action. In this way we can attribute evaluative correctness conditions to emotional experiences, even though their main function isn't representational.<sup>9</sup> There is evidently something amiss with our feelings if they tell us to do something we don't have reason to do.

Somewhat more precisely, my proposal is the following:

*Coarse-Grained Fittingness from Reasons*

---

<sup>9</sup> This move is analogous to the one made by attitudinalist theorists like Deonna and Teroni (2022). I come back to their view and representationalist alternatives below.



Emotional experiences are *fitting* if and only if the non-evaluative features of their object give us presumptively decisive reason to do what they tell us to do for their characteristic end, even if that reason is all-things-considered defeated or disabled by other considerations.<sup>10</sup>

For example, fearing the gorilla is fitting, because the gorilla's non-evaluative features do give us presumptively decisive reason to escape in order to protect ourselves. That's not the case when we're scared of an overfriendly poodle. Indignation towards an oppressive regime is fitting, because the regime's features give us a presumptively decisive reason to protest it in order to force compliance with our normative expectations – even if the presumption is defeated in virtue of the cost of protesting.<sup>11</sup> In general, the kind of considerations that make it fitting to have an emotional experience can diverge from reasons to act as the experience directs us to, because what makes the emotion fitting is that something about the object gives the subject a presumptively decisive reason to act in that way, even if that reason is defeated, disabled, or attenuated by other considerations, such as the cost or even impossibility of acting. Finally, an evil demon's demand to admire her on pain of destruction of the world does *not* make admiring her fitting, because her non-evaluative features don't give presumptively decisive reason to look up to her in order to come closer to our ideals (cf. Kauppinen 2019), even though there may indeed be most reason overall to admire her in this scenario.<sup>12</sup>

---

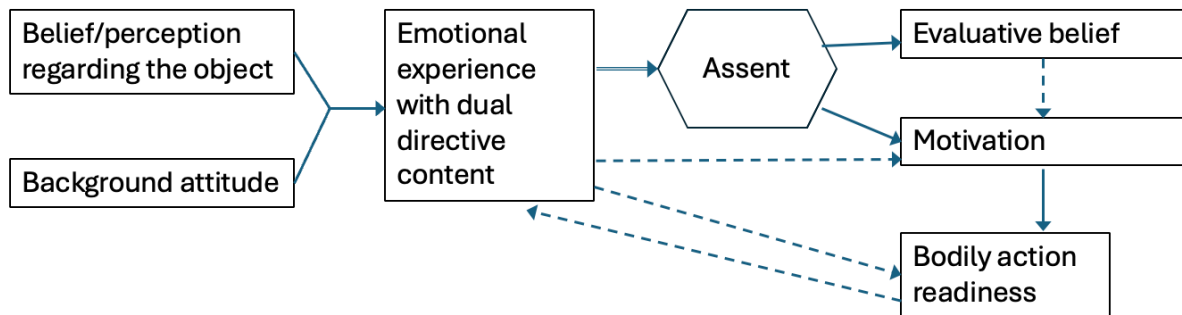
<sup>10</sup> I call this 'coarse-grained fittingness', because there are further important questions to ask – for example, as Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2023) say, we can also ask about the fittingness of the *size* of the emotion, or whether its intensity is right in the situation. See also Achs and Na'aman (2023) for subtleties of fit. Much more needs to be said to address such issues, but I cannot do it here. On how to understand intensity in terms of preference-ranking of what affective experiences tell us to do, see Kauppinen (2021a).

<sup>11</sup> I thank Macalester Bell for this scenario.

<sup>12</sup> For congenial accounts of how to distinguish right and wrong kind of reasons, see Hieronymi 2005 and Kauppinen 2014.

Here is a diagram of what emotional cognition overall might look like if Dual

Directivism is true:



Presumably, emotional experience is typically triggered by belief or perception (“there’s a bear over there!”) combined with some relevant background attitude (“I want to live!”), possibly in a separate stage of appraisal, which I haven’t pictured here. I emphasize that I leave open the possibility that the belief that precedes emotion is sometimes an evaluative one. Whether or not that is the case, occurrent emotional experience places the question of whether to act as it proposes on our agenda. It might spur inquiry or deliberation about whether such action is really merited. If it concludes with assent, or if we simply fail to dissent (with or without reflection on the matter), so that we take the experience at face value, we will have the corresponding evaluative belief (“There’s a presumptively decisive reason to escape from the gorilla in order to protect myself” – or, equivalently, “The gorilla is dangerous to me”) and motivation (“Run away!”).

It's important to note, however, that it's also possible that the guidance provided by the feeling *bypasses* assent or dissent when it comes to motivation – famously, we can find ourselves motivated by fear not to step on an airplane we believe to be safe. The same is true of bodily action readiness, which need not wait for assent either. We should expect such shortcuts to exist, since emotional cognition is evolutionarily earlier than any kind of rational control. Given that rational control is built on top of an older action control mechanism that presumably does much of or all the work in other animals, it's not surprising that the latter

can function independently in humans as well. Note that I've also included an arrow in the opposite direction, since it's common for bodily preparedness to influence the phenomenology of emotional experience, as attitudinalists like Deonna and Teroni (2024) emphasize.

Finally, I want to emphasize that I'm not offering a full theory of emotion, but an account of the phenomenal content of emotional experience, which I claim fits with a plausible overall picture of emotional cognition. I thus leave it open where in the diagram above we should draw the line around emotion, as long as experience is included.<sup>13</sup> For all I say, full-blown emotion may include e.g. judgment or motivation.

### *Comparisons*

Many existing theories of emotion have little to say about emotional experience, and are thus of little interest for the question of phenomenal grasping. In this category belong e.g. the belief-desire theory of emotion, judgmentalist theories, and motivational theories, for which feelings are mere 'add-ons' to emotion. They may give some secondary role for feeling – for example, Scarantino says that for his motivational theory, what is felt is “that a certain (in)action tendency has acquired control precedence” (2012, 180), which is hardly a candidate for an experience that directly grasps value. To put it crudely, all of these views allow for zombies to have full-blown emotions, which I consider a deal-breaker. Any view that conceives of the experiential side of emotion in non-intentional terms, usually as mere

---

<sup>13</sup> What about unconscious emotions? Isn't it possible that we realize only afterwards that our actions were motivated by unconscious anger at someone? Such cases are an evident challenge for any account of emotion that highlights the feeling aspect. My basic response is that many 'unconscious emotions' are in fact *unattended* emotions. That is to say, the total phenomenal character of the experience of someone who is angry at another person without realizing it will be different from the total phenomenal character of the experience of someone who isn't angry. Just like stress or mood, feelings can colour the way we experience our situation and impact on our motivation without being the focus of our attention. (That's of course compatible with their focusing our attention on their *objects*.) Alternatively, 'unconscious emotions' might be dispositions to have emotional experiences, or e.g. states of motivation or evaluative beliefs based on emotional experience.

bodily phenomenology<sup>14</sup>, is also ruled out as an explanation of grasping value. It may be worth noting that on the picture of emotional cognition just outlined, each of these views gets some aspect of emotion that is downstream of emotional experience right, even if they miss out on the significance of feeling.

But there are also views that highlight emotional experience. Perhaps the most popular such view is *emotional perceptualism*, for which emotions are in crucial respects like perceptual experiences, and in the good case, provide us with acquaintance with value. For example, Christine Tappolet says that in the good case, “emotions are like sensory experiences in that they allow us to be aware of certain features of the world” (Tappolet 2016, 18). Peter Poellner holds that emotional experiences “in favourable circumstances disclose value properties to the subjects of those experiences” (2016, 1) (see also Döring 2007, Milona 2016, Lord 2018, and Ballard 2021, among others). Alas, critics have made a convincing case that emotional experience lacks a crucial element of perceptual experience, namely its *presentational* phenomenology (Brogaard and Chudnoff 2016, Mitchell 2021).<sup>15</sup> Very briefly, one influential line of argument has it that emotional experience doesn’t seem from the inside as if it brings us into acquaintance with value properties, since if it did, it wouldn’t make sense to ask for *reasons* for it, and it would make sense to offer the experience itself as a reason, in the way it makes sense to say “I saw it!” when challenged about a perceptible fact (Brady 2013; for further arguments, see Harrison 2020). Unlike experiences with presentational phenomenology, emotional experiences are not fit to serve as unjustified justifiers.

---

<sup>14</sup> The best-known view emphasising bodily phenomenology is James (1884), who indeed identifies emotions with feelings of bodily changes. But the same problem arises for views like Prinz (2004), which hold that the bodily changes themselves represent the external conditions that they reliably track, since the intentionality isn’t part of the phenomenal content of the emotion.

<sup>15</sup> As Elijah Chudnoff puts it, “What it is for an experience of yours to have presentational phenomenology with respect to *p* is for it to both make it seem to you that *p* and make it seem to you as if this experience makes you aware of a truth-maker for *p*” (Chudnoff 2013, 37).

Secondly, emotional experience lacks the *transparency* of perceptual experience, whose phenomenal character simply reflects the features of its object. This is manifest in the fact that we can only describe what it's like to see a dog, say, only by describing the dog itself (Tye 1995). But critics like Jonathan Mitchell (2021) and Julian Deonna and Fabrice Teroni (2022) point out that emotional experience is *not* transparent like this. To describe what it's like to feel fear, it doesn't suffice to talk about danger, but also about our reactions to it, including bodily ones. (For Directivism, such reactions are downstream of directive content, but are by default part of the total emotional experience.) I take it that these considerations make it implausible that emotions would constitute some kind of perceptual or quasi-perceptual experience.<sup>16</sup>

One leading alternative to perceptualism is Deonna and Teroni's (2015; 2022) *attitudinalism*. For them, roughly, emotional experience is experience of felt action readiness – for example, when we're angry, we feel our body as prepared for a form of bodily hostility towards the object of the emotion. It is in virtue of this sort of evaluative attitude towards the non-evaluative content that the emotion gets evaluative correctness conditions. For example, they hold that anger is fitting if and only if bodily hostility towards the object of the emotion is pro tanto fitting.<sup>17</sup> In my view, talk of pro tanto 'fittingness' of engagement with an object (that is, some sort of action) is misleading. Actions are not the sort of things that can be fitting or unfitting – instead, we have pro tanto *reasons* for or against them. Especially if reinterpreted in terms of experiences of action-readiness being fitting when we have reason for the corresponding action, attitudinalism comes quite close to the present account. The key remaining difference is that for Directivism, emotional experience itself guides us towards action without being mediated by experience of bodily reactions directed toward action. I

---

<sup>16</sup> I didn't always think this way – in Kauppinen (2013) I defended a form of quasi-perceptualism.

<sup>17</sup> Talk of pro tanto fittingness rather than simply fittingness is a response to criticism by Rossi and Tappolet (2019).

believe this is more faithful to the phenomenology of emotion, and also allows us to see bodily action readiness and associated feelings as contingent *responses* to the initial emotional experience. This gives it some explanatory depth – after all, why is it that fear involves the specific bodily reactions it characteristically does? Directivism can say that it’s because it tells us to escape in order to protect ourselves, which, in turn, typically requires readiness for certain kind of action. Directivism also evidently makes sense of emotional experience that doesn’t involve a specific bodily action readiness (see D’Angelo 2022), as well as emotional responses to fiction, in which it seems to be possible to have just the feeling without the motivation or bodily response.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4 Grasping Value and the Limits of Moral Understanding**

Suppose, then, that something along the lines of Dual Directivism is correct. How, then, do emotions grasp value? Let’s recall my general thesis about grasping a property:

*Phenomenal Grasping of Properties*

S phenomenally grasps property P only if what it is to be P is manifest in the phenomenal character of S’s experience.

To get at what grasping value properties involves, let’s consider what it is to be valuable, to form a part of the evaluative landscape in which we find ourselves when we need to act. Here is how Mark Johnston aptly describes it:

The world of our lived experience is a world of default pathways marked out by fully determinate versions of the appealing and the repulsive, the erotic and the banal, the beautiful and the ugly. The world we sense is layered with significance, it presents

---

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Mitchell (2021) also provides a broadly speaking attitudinalist account of emotional experience, which is in many ways congenial to the present proposal, except that he believes emotional experience involves attitudes towards evaluative properties, which must thus be somehow non-conceptually represented in the content of the experience. I lack the space to discuss his view properly here.

things to be done and avoided, continued and broken off, and does this prior to any deliberation or planning of action on our part. (Johnston 2001, 188–189)

I believe this is a good description of what values are like in the context of our practical engagement with the world. Value facts are not like other facts, just *there*, but call on us or attract us to *do* something. One way or another, they are constitutively linked with reasons for action – if something is disgusting, there is a reason to avoid contact with it, among other things. Further, properties like disgustingness are negative in a sense that may not be reducible to the kind of reasons associated with them, while others are positive. For the nature of evaluative properties to be fully manifest in the phenomenal character of our experience, then, that character *must* be valenced and directive in nature.<sup>19</sup> That’s the most fundamental reason why value facts are not grasped via some particularly clear and distinct representation or a state with presentational phenomenology, but by emotional experiences, at least in part. Or, to put it the other way around, perceptualism leaves it a kind of mystery what it is to non-conceptually represent an evaluative property *qua* evaluative. Directivism offers an answer: it is to experience something about the object calling for a specific kind of response and as positive or negative.

The first thesis I’ll defend is thus the following:

*Phenomenal Grasping of Value Properties*

S phenomenally grasps an evaluative property E that is constitutively linked with reasons to respond in ways W only if S has a valenced experience whose phenomenal content prompts her to respond to some non-evaluative properties in ways W, and to treat those properties as giving a presumptively decisive reason to respond in ways W.

---

<sup>19</sup> I say ‘valenced and directive’, because although I myself believe that valence, too, is explained by directive content of the right kind, I want to leave it open for the purposes of the present argument that it is a separate component.

Since I've just argued in the previous section that valenced experiences that have phenomenal content like this are emotions, or at least their feeling aspect, this amounts to saying that feelings are necessary for phenomenally grasping value *properties*. Insofar as grasp of value properties is necessary for full grasp of value *concepts*, and concepts are the building blocks of propositions, affective experiences are also necessary for fully grasping value *propositions*. But the most interesting and common cases, including my initial examples, involve true value propositions or value facts. Here is my thesis regarding them:

*Phenomenal Grasping of Value Facts (PG)*

S phenomenally grasps that object O has the evaluative property E that is constitutively linked with reasons to respond in ways W only if S has a valenced experience whose phenomenal content prompts her to respond to some of O's non-evaluative properties in ways W, and to treat those properties as giving a presumptively decisive reason to respond in ways W, and assents at least to the latter.

Note that I'm here proposing that having a fitting emotional experience and assenting to at least the rationalizing directive is *necessary* for phenomenally grasping that the object has the evaluative property it does have. I want to leave it open whether they are also jointly *sufficient* for phenomenal grasping.<sup>20</sup> Note also that I don't claim that one needs to be *motivated* accordingly in order to grasp an evaluative truth (*contra* e.g. Callahan 2018, 152). Otherwise we couldn't e.g. grasp the badness of something we know we can't do anything about and are consequently not motivated to do anything about. Nevertheless, since emotional experiences motivate by default, PG explains why phenomenal grasping is likely

---

<sup>20</sup> The reason why they might not be is that phenomenal grasp may also presuppose non-phenomenal grasping to ensure we're really getting at the right property – for example, it's not obvious whether feeling fitting guilt gets at precisely blameworthiness, if the subject lacks the ability to recognize that had they been faultlessly ignorant or hadn't violated any authoritative norm, they wouldn't be to blame.



to have motivational effects, as in the often discussed case of coming to grasp that smoking is bad for oneself, which can have life-changing effects even for someone who has for a long time *known* the fact (Bourget 2017).

What about thin evaluative properties? I would tentatively propose that phenomenally grasping a thin evaluative property like something being bad for me consists in a *felt aversion*, which is better described as an affective state rather than an emotion in the strict sense. Interestingly, aversion will in that case not reduce to an anti-desire, if we understand desires as states of motivation. Similarly, experiencing something as good, in contrast to merely believing it to be good, may consist in *felt attraction* to it, which also comes apart from desire for it, even if it by default gives rise to motivation. (This allows the present view to avoid some of the challenges for Graham Oddie's (2005) view, according to which experiences of the good are themselves desires.)

To confirm the role of emotional experience in phenomenal grasping of value, we can apply the two kinds of argument that Bourget (2017) makes for phenomenal grasping in general. The Transition Argument, as I'll call it, says that the right kind of emotional experience is necessary for coming to fully grasp a value property or fact, and the Limitation Argument says that we can't grasp what we can't have the right kind of emotional experience of.

So let's first consider the transition in my initial case of Last Theft. As I described it, Jean knows right away that what he has done – basically, being pointlessly cruel to a child – is wrong. But his moral sensibility has been deadened by years of unjust hard labour, so he initially shrugs his shoulders. However, in Hugo's psychologically plausible telling, the kindness and trust shown to him by the Bishop gradually undermines his defenses, and he has, first, an experience whose phenomenal character tells him to make amends to repair his moral relationship with the boy. Whether or not he has had such experiences earlier but

succeeded at blocking them, now he can't help but assent, and desperately and in vain seeks the boy to return the stolen coin. Alongside this feeling, he also has an experience whose phenomenal character tells him he needs to change his whole way of engaging with the world in order to avoid falling dramatically short of being the kind of person he should be, and that he has presumptively decisive reason to do so. That's the feeling of shame that indeed does, in Hugo's novel, move him toward a wholesale transformation. PG says that these fitting feelings he assents to are necessary for Jean to grasp his blameworthiness and failure as a person in a way that goes beyond knowledge. It entails that even if Jean did all the same things out of a desire to be a better person, but without feeling any different than he would when, say, doing his taxes out of a desire to avoid trouble with the law, he would not *phenomenally* grasp the disvalue of his actions or his flaws.

Let's also consider here another interesting case of emotional transition from Peter Goldie, which is the source of my gorilla examples above:

*Loose Gorilla*

Imagine you are in a zoo, looking at a gorilla grimly loping from left to right in its cage. You are thinking of the gorilla as dangerous, but you do not feel fear, as it seems to be safely behind bars. Then you see that the door to the cage has been left wide open. Just for a moment, though, you fail to put the two thoughts—the gorilla is dangerous, the cage is open—together. Then, suddenly, you do put them together: now your way of thinking of the gorilla as dangerous is new; now it is dangerous in an emotionally relevant way for you. The earlier thought, naturally expressed as 'That gorilla is dangerous', differs in content from the new thought, although this new thought, thought with emotional feeling, might also be naturally expressed in the same words. (Goldie 2000, 61)

What Goldie says may be slightly misleading, so let me emphasize that the crucial transition is between the moment at which you have put together the thoughts that the gorilla is dangerous and that the cage is open, so that you *know* that *you* are in danger from the gorilla, and the moment soon after at which you feel *fear towards* the gorilla. According to PG, what happens is that at first you don't phenomenally grasp that you're in danger, because the phenomenal character of your experience doesn't reflect the danger of your situation. And then it does – when you feel fear, the phenomenal content of your experience directs you to urgently escape and directs you to treat something about the gorilla as a presumptively decisive reason to urgently escape, and when you (at least partially) assent to the latter, you endorse being so motivated and maybe even acting accordingly. Goldie says that your new thought “differs in content from your earlier thought”, even though it could be expressed with the same words. I think this is importantly right, and PG offers an explanation of it. According to it, the content of your earlier thought was merely representational, but your current thought has *directive* phenomenal content. And you could indeed express endorsement of this directive content by saying “This is dangerous!” to the extent that talk of dangerousness essentially reduces to talk of having reason to escape the situation for protection.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, there's a predictable objection to consider: couldn't these transition cases be explained in terms of grasping the evaluative fact in a non-emotional way, which might or might not subsequently *cause* an emotional response? After all, nobody claims that phenomenal grasping in general has to be emotional. I have two responses to this. First, I want to emphasize again that we are looking for a state such that what it is to be valuable in some way is manifest in what it is like to experience it. Given the nature of values, it is really

---

<sup>21</sup> One tricky feature of Goldie's scenario is that it's tempting to think that someone who is competent with managing a threat can perfectly well grasp that it is *dangerous* without feeling fear. That's why it may be more precise to say that the formal object of fear is the *fearsome* or fear-worthy, something that is genuinely unmanageable for the subject.

hard to see how a state that lacks valence and directive phenomenal content could play this role. And I can't think of valenced and directive phenomenal states that are not emotions or similar affective experiences like felt attraction or aversion. What, after all, would such a state be? This argument is a psychological counterpart of the fairly common metaethical claim that normative properties are "just too different" from natural ones to be reducible to them (e.g. Enoch 2011). I'm not committed to any particular view of the metaphysics of normativity here, but I take it that it is extremely plausible that non-derivatively normative properties (of which the evaluative are a subset) are deeply different from other ones. And given this difference in nature, we should expect that the experiences in which such normative facts are manifest are also deeply different from experiences in which non-normative properties or facts are manifest. So even if being 'struck' by the fact that Smith does not know in a Gettier case consists in an affectively neutral presentational state, as John Bengson (2015) has it, we have solid reason to think that experiencing that you're to blame for what you did does not.

Second, it's worth highlighting here that I'm talking about the feeling aspect of emotion as a necessary condition, so what I'm saying is compatible with grasping without a full-blown emotion, which might include motivational and doxastic elements. What I'm suspicious of is the existence of entirely neutral phenomenal grasping of value. I believe that any plausible case of putative non-emotional grasping of value properties or facts will turn out to either involve feelings without a full-blown emotion *or* be a case of *non-phenomenal* (and therefore incomplete) grasping.

The second argument in support of the role of emotion in grasping is the Limitation Argument (see also Magalotti 2024). I will be brief here. The core idea is that the limits of phenomenal grasping of evaluative facts and limits of the right kind of emotional experience coincide. Consider here, for example, moral truths that involve large numbers. For example,

critics of using empathy as a guide for moral judgment, especially Paul Bloom (2016), have argued that one core problem is that empathy is inherently *innumerate*. We do not necessarily have a stronger empathetic response to the suffering of a thousand people than to the suffering of one. Indeed, studies of the so-called ‘identifiable victim effect’ (Slovic 2007) suggest the opposite. For example, in one well-known study, people were willing to donate more for the same life-saving treatment for one child identified by name and described in concrete detail than for a group of eight children (Kogut and Ritov 2005). The line attributed to Stalin – “one death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic” – is often rightly evoked in this context. What PG suggests is that it is precisely because our emotional responses are not appropriately sensitive to statistical facts that it is much harder for us to phenomenally grasp how bad the suffering or death of many is, or how much *worse* it is than the suffering of one. Something similar goes for grasping very small probabilities of harm or benefit. So, it looks like the limitations of our emotional experience coincide with the limitations of our phenomenal grasp of value, which is nicely explained if the two amount to the same.

The second limitation that PG predicts is that individuals with certain kinds of emotional deficits will have trouble achieving grasp of some evaluative propositions. Suppose it’s true that psychopaths are incapable of feeling guilt. PG says that they may be capable of knowing that they’ve wronged someone, and may be derivatively motivated to avoid wrongdoing at least when it is in their self-interest. But they will not fully understand what it is for something to be morally wrong or blameworthy, and will consequently predictably struggle to grasp why certain acts that, say, hurt other people are not-to-be-done regardless of what one wants. And that, in turn, will predictably cause trouble in novel situations. I think this is exactly what we should think.

The Limitation Argument naturally leads to another obvious objection: PG is *too* restrictive, since we *can* grasp things that are not objects of emotional experience. Alison

Hills (2024) raises this type of worry for *perceptual* accounts of moral understanding. As she says, “it is not clear that moral principles, character traits, social systems can be represented in any kind of visual experience” (xx). Nevertheless, we might say, we can grasp evaluative facts involving them. The first thing I have to say about this is that the scope of possible emotional experience is clearly broader than that of perceptual experience – we *can* have at least some sort of emotional responses to the kind of things that Hills mentions. But perhaps not all of them. Take a principle like “There is a strong *pro tanto* reason to keep freely made promises”. What kind of emotional experience could have the corresponding directive content? If we can phenomenally grasp such general moral truths, PG is in trouble as a necessary condition.

I’m not convinced that this is a genuine challenge to the view, however. That’s because it is very plausible that we can only achieve phenomenal grasp of moral principles, to the extent we can, by way of considering individual instances. Consider how rare it is to read an ethics paper that *doesn’t* illustrate the principles it proposes by way of concrete scenarios. Indeed, I would venture that our convictions even in our own ethical theories rest on the felt appeal of their implications for particular cases. We seem to be capable of something like what W.D. Ross (1930) called ‘intuitive induction’, whereby we generalize those feelings towards a whole class of cases. And when we can’t do so, it is not a big bullet to bite to say that we’re unable to *phenomenally* grasp the general moral truth in question.

## 5. Conclusion

I started by provisionally accepting that we can fully grasp evaluative truths only by way of suitable emotional experience. If what I’ve said about the nature of phenomenal grasping and the nature of emotional experience is along the right lines, we now have a clearer picture of how and in what sense this could be true. What follows from this?

Well, the first thing of note is that this offers an alternative picture of the epistemic role of emotion. While some have argued that emotions play a role in the epistemic *justification* of evaluative beliefs, there are serious reasons to doubt this, given challenges to the perceptual theory (e.g. Brady 2013). The view I've defended amounts to a much more modest epistemic role for emotion. But it's not nothing. If we cannot fully grasp evaluative properties, propositions, and facts without having the right kind of feeling, fitting emotional experiences will be essential for moral and more broadly evaluative understanding. They will, perhaps, promote better *explanatory* understanding of why something is right or wrong, as Callahan (2018) argues, and may help with making judgments about novel situations, as I suggested above.

However, I want to focus here on two more direct roles of grasping evaluative truths. The first is *deliberative*. On the view I've defended, when we phenomenally grasp that something is morally wrong, say, our experience directs us to treat something about it as being a presumptively decisive reason against doing it and focuses our attention on it. Phenomenally grasped wrongness is thus *hard to ignore*, in contrast to merely known wrongness. Someone might know perfectly well that it is wrong to cut off water and electricity from a million enemy civilians, even if it promises some military advantage. But as long as they don't phenomenally grasp this wrongness – and it can be tough, when we're talking about large numbers, and the person is in any case angry with the enemy – they may well be tempted to *rationalize* it away. They may try to find an excuse or loophole or mental workaround, to exaggerate the relative weight of the military advantage in their deliberation, and so on. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for thinking “Smoking is bad for me”. Phenomenal grasping, in its insistence on the weightiness of the reasons it makes available, makes this sort of move harder, and thus functions as a *rationalization-stopper*.

Second, it has been common in the literature to link explanatory moral understanding with *moral worth* (e.g. Hills 2009). Again, my focus here hasn't been on understanding why, but on grasping value. It is also plausibly linked with moral worth, but also more directly with *virtue*. Here I'm not thinking so much of the traditional Aristotelian picture – though it certainly can make sense of the importance of right kind of emotional appearance for aiming correctly (Marechal 2023) – but of Medieval views that highlight virtue as the right kind of orientation to the good, or 'ordered love', as Augustine puts it, and Thomas Hurka's (2001) recursive view, on which it is 'good to love the good'. The argument is simple: it is essential to virtue to know what is good or bad and to be disposed to act and deliberate accordingly, but as long as we fail to *phenomenally* grasp the goodness of the good and the badness of the bad, our orientation is imperfect. If my reason tells me to donate to war orphans, but my experience tells me *not* to be generous, I fail to be fully virtuous. So a dispositional phenomenal grasp is plausibly constitutive of a proper personal orientation to value and thus an essential component of virtue.

Finally, because sentimentalism about grasping value doesn't presuppose epistemic sentimentalism in general, it is a relatively ecumenical account. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to claim that a very famous non-sentimentalist accepted something like it:

The *consciousness of a free submission of the will to the law*, yet as combined with an unavoidable constraint put on all inclinations though only by one's own reason, is *respect* for the law. ... (Kant 1788/1996, 204–205, my emphasis)

"[A]ny *consciousness of obligation* depends upon *moral feeling* to make us aware of the constraint present in the thought of duty" (Kant 1797/1996, 528, my emphasis)

Yes, Kant says that our consciousness of the obligation imposed on us by the moral law consists in "respect" or "moral feeling". I think what he means is that we are most directly



aware of our obligations by way of a feeling that strikes down our self-conceit and tells us to submit to law we must give ourselves as rational agents regardless of inclination – in short, that we only fully grasp our moral obligation through a rational feeling. I agree.<sup>22</sup>

## References

- Achs, Rachel and Na'aman, Oded (2023). The subtleties of fit: reassessing the fit-value biconditionals. *Philosophical Studies* 180, 2523–2546.
- Ballard, Brian Scott (2021). The Epistemic Significance of Emotional Experience. *Emotion Review* 13 (2):113-124.
- Barlassina, Luca & Hayward, Max Khan (2019). More of me! Less of me!: reflexive imperativism about affective phenomenal character. *Mind* 128 (512): 1013–44.
- Bengson, John (2015). The Intellectual Given. *Mind* 124 (495): 707–760.
- Bloom, Paul (2016). *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Ecco Books.
- Bourget, David (2017). The Role of Consciousness in Grasping and Understanding. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95 (2):285-318.
- Bourget, David (forthcoming). A Phenomenal Theory of Grasping and Understanding. In Andrei Ionuț Mărășoiu & Mircea Dumitru (eds.), *Understanding and Conscious Experience: Philosophical and Scientific Perspectives*. Routledge.
- Brady, Michael (2013). *Emotional Insight: The Epistemic Role of Emotional Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>22</sup> I owe special thanks to Julian Deonna, Jaakko Hirvelä, Tricia Magalotti, Lilian O'Brien, and Fabrice Teroni for their very insightful written comments. I'm also grateful to audiences in Essen, Toronto, Cologne, and Dubrovnik for feedback on earlier versions of this paper. There are too many people to thank for their comments and suggestions, but I do want to note that it was the invitations from Neil Roughley, Christine Tappolet, Marvin Backes, Thomas Grundmann, Justin D'Arms, and Declan Smithies that made it possible for me to work out my rough ideas with the help of so many excellent philosophers.

- Brogaard, Berit and Chudnoff, Elijah (2016). Against Emotional Dogmatism. *Philosophical Issues* 26: 59–77.
- Callahan, Laura Frances (2018). Moral Testimony: A Re-Conceived Understanding Explanation. *Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (272):437-459.
- Chudnoff, Elijah (2013). *Intuition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- D'Angelo, Lorenza (2022). Emotional Experience and the Senses. *Philosophers' Imprint* 22 (20): 1–20.
- D'Arms, Justin and Jacobson, Daniel (2023). *Rational Sentimentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deonna, Julien and Teroni, Fabrice (2015). Emotions as Attitudes. *dialectica* 69 (3):293-311.
- Deonna, Julien and Teroni, Fabrice (2024). Emotions and Their Correctness Conditions: A Defense of Attitudinalism. *Erkenntnis* 89, 45–64.
- Döring, Sabine (2007). Seeing What to Do: Affective Perception and Rational Motivation. *Dialectica* 61 (3):363-394.
- Enoch, David (2011). *Taking Morality Seriously*. Oxford University Press.
- Frank, Robert (1988). *Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of Emotions*. Norton.
- Frijda, Nico (1986). *The Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goldie, Peter (2000). *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grimm, Stephen (2010). The goal of explanation. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 41 (4):337-344.
- Harrison, Eilidh (2020). The prospects of emotional dogmatism. *Philosophical Studies* 178 (8):2535-2555.
- Hieronymi, Pamela (2005). The Wrong Kind of Reason. *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (9):437 - 457.

- Hills, Alison (2009). Moral testimony and moral epistemology. *Ethics* 120 (1):94-127.
- Hills, Alison (2015). Understanding Why. *Noûs* 49 (2):661-688.
- Hugo, Victor (1887). *Les misérables. Vol. I*. Philadelphia: John Wanamaker.
- Hurka, Thomas (2001). *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Inwood, Brad (1987). *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, Frank (1982). Epiphenomenal qualia. *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (April):127-136.
- James, William (1884). What is an Emotion? *Mind* 9:188.
- Johnston, Mark (2001). The authority of affect. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1):181-214.
- Kant, Immanuel (1788/1996). *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Mary J. Gregor (tr. and ed.), *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133–271.
- Kant, Immanuel (1788/1996). *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Kant 1996, 133–271.
- Kant, Immanuel (1797/1996). *Metaphysics of Morals*. In Kant 1996, 353–603.
- Kant, Immanuel (1996). *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2013). A Humean theory of moral intuition. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (3):360-381.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2014). Fittingness and Idealization. *Ethics* 124 (3):572-588.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2019). Ideals and Idols: On the Nature and Appropriateness of Agential Admiration. In Alfred Archer & André Grahle (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2021a). Relational Imperativism about Affective Valence. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind* 1:341-371.
- Kauppinen, Antti (2021). Rationality as the Rule of Reason. *Noûs* 55 (3):538-559.

- Kogut, Tehila and Ritov, Ilana (2005). The Singularity Effect of Identified Victims in Separate and Joint Evaluations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 97 (2005) 106–116.
- Kriegel, Uriah (forthcoming). Imagination, Modal Knowledge, and Modal Understanding. In Ingrid Vendrell-Ferran & Christiana Werner (eds.), *Imagination and Experience: Philosophical Explorations*. Routledge.
- Kurth, Charlie (2016). Anxiety, Normative Uncertainty, and Social Regulation. *Biology and Philosophy* 31 (1):1-21.
- Lord, Errol (2018). How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Deference. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13.
- Magalotti, Tricia (2024). Emotions and the Phenomenal Grasping of Epistemic Blameworthiness. *Philosophical Issues*.
- Marechal, Patricia (2023). Practical Wisdom as Conviction in Aristotle's Ethics. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Early View, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13032>.
- Martínez, Manolo (2011). Imperative Content and the Painfulness of Pain. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10 (1): 67–90.
- Mendelovici, Angela (2018). *The Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality*. Oxford University Press.
- Milona, Michael (2016). Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (4):897-915.
- Mitchell, Jonathan (2021). *Emotion as Feeling Towards Value: A Theory of Emotional Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Müller, Jean Moritz (2017). How (Not) to Think of Emotions as Evaluative Attitudes. *dialectica* 71 (2): 281–308.
- O'Brien, Lilian (2023). Practical Understanding. *Philosophical Issues* 33 (1): 183–197.

- Poellner, Peter (2016) 'Phenomenology and the Perceptual Model of Emotion', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116 (3): 1–28.
- Prinz, Jesse (2004). *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of the Emotions*. Oxford University Press.
- Ross, W. D. (1930). *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Scarantino, Andrea (2014). The motivational theory of emotions. In Justin D'Arms & Daniel Jacobson (eds.), *Moral Psychology and Human Agency: Philosophical Essays on the Science of Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Slovic, P. (2007). "If I look at the mass I will never act": Psychic numbing and genocide. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2(2), 79–95.
- Strevens, Michael (2024). Grasp and scientific understanding: a recognition account. *Philosophical Studies* 181 (4):741-762.
- Tappolet, Christine (2016). *Emotions, Value, and Agency*. Oxford University Press.
- Tye, M. (1995). *Ten Problems of Consciousness: A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind*. MIT Press.
- Vanello, Daniel (2022). Moral Understanding, Affect, and the Imagination. *Inquiry*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2077431>