

Emotions and the phenomenal grasping of epistemic blameworthiness

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider the potential implications of the observation that epistemic judgment seems to be less emotional than moral judgment. I argue that regardless of whether emotions are necessary for blame, blaming emotions do play an important epistemic role in the moral domain. They allow us to grasp propositions about moral blameworthiness and thereby to appreciate their significance in a special way. Further, I argue that if we generally lack blaming emotions in the epistemic domain, then we are unable to grasp propositions about epistemic blameworthiness. As a result, regardless of one's theory of epistemic blame, there emerges a tension between the claims that we are epistemically blameworthy for our epistemic failings and the claim that we do not feel epistemic blaming emotions.

1 | INTRODUCTION

It seems clear that epistemic judgment is comparatively less emotional than moral judgment. I can judge that my friend is epistemically irrational for believing that she will have a prosperous month on the basis of the alignment of the stars without feeling any sort of blaming emotion toward her. In contrast, it is rare that we judge someone to have committed an unexcused moral wrong without feeling blaming emotions. While most theorists of epistemic blame agree with this comparative claim, there is little consensus regarding the question of whether epistemic judgment and blame

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are *generally* unemotional in nature, much less what an account of epistemic blaming emotions might look like. However, if blaming emotions are indeed generally absent in the epistemic case, this could have important implications for the epistemic blameworthiness debate.

Typically, blame theorists think that if the comparative coolness of epistemic judgment is a problem for the defense of epistemic blameworthiness, this is because of some essential role that emotions play in *blame* itself. In this paper, I argue that even if blame does not require emotion, there remains an important tension between the claims that we are epistemically blameworthy for our epistemic failings and the claim that epistemic judgment is generally unemotional. I argue that, in the moral case, regardless of one's account of moral blame, the moral blaming emotions allow us to phenomenally grasp propositions about moral blameworthiness and so to appreciate its significance in an important way. If epistemic judgment is emotionally cool, then we lack this mode of access to facts about epistemic blameworthiness and, I argue, are therefore unable to phenomenally grasp them. This would put pressure on defenders of epistemic blameworthiness to consider more carefully the question of whether epistemic blame does sometimes involve blaming emotions and to provide a picture of what those kinds of emotional responses typically look like.

In Section 2, I discuss the relationship between Epistemic Coolness and Epistemic Blameworthiness and how those two claims might be in tension with one another. In Section 3, I explain how it is that emotions in general afford phenomenal grasping of evaluative claims. In Section 4, I provide a series of cases intended to show that the absence of particular emotions prevents phenomenal grasping of a corresponding class of evaluative propositions. In Section 5, I explain how the moral blaming emotions are particularly well-suited to phenomenally present propositions about moral blameworthiness and why, if we lack those emotions in the epistemic case, it is unlikely that there are any other mental states that can play this same epistemic role. The conclusion is that if epistemic judgment is emotionally cool, then we are incapable of phenomenally grasping epistemic blameworthiness. Finally, Section 6 concludes with a brief overview of some potential implications for the debate over epistemic blameworthiness.

2 | EPISTEMIC COOLNESS AND EPISTEMIC BLAMEWORTHINESS

In this section, I consider the relationship between the emotional coolness of epistemic judgment and the existence of epistemic blameworthiness. I will treat defenders of epistemic blameworthiness as endorsing something like the following:

(Epistemic Blameworthiness): Absent excusing conditions, we are epistemically blameworthy for our epistemic failings.

We need not worry here about what the epistemic failures are that we are blameworthy for. But, since it can be helpful to have a target in mind, I will focus on failures to believe in accordance with the evidence.¹

The version of the epistemic coolness thesis that I will consider here is the following:

(Epistemic Coolness): Generally, we do not feel emotions in response to judgments of epistemic failure.

Again, there is no settled view among defenders of epistemic blameworthiness regarding whether Epistemic Coolness is true.² Nor is there a general account of what epistemic blaming

emotions might be like. The question I want to consider is whether there is a problematic tension between Epistemic Coolness and Epistemic Blameworthiness. If there is, then it would be important for defenders of Epistemic Blameworthiness to either diffuse that tension or show that Epistemic Coolness is false.

The most obvious potential threat that Epistemic Coolness might pose to Epistemic Blameworthiness comes from what I will call *emotion-based accounts* of blame, according to which blame centrally involves emotional responses such as anger, indignation, or guilt. I will call these kinds of emotions, which have typically been called “reactive attitudes” in the Strawsonian tradition, *blaming emotions*. Emotion-based accounts of blame hold that blaming emotions are necessary for blame. To be blameworthy on this view is to be the deserving target of these same emotions. Without blaming emotions, it is thought, the notion of blame will be sucked dry of its significance.³ It is generally acknowledged that blaming someone requires something beyond merely judging them to blameworthy. This special feature that sets blaming apart from judging blameworthy accounts for what I will call, following Boulton (2021a), the *significance* of blame, the thing that makes blame seem ‘weighty’ in a way that judging blameworthy is not. Much more could be said about what it takes to properly account for this significance, but since blame itself is not my focus here, this preliminary characterization will suffice for present purposes.

On the emotion-based account of blame, a fairly clear, albeit slightly indirect, tension arises between Epistemic Coolness and Epistemic Blameworthiness. If emotions are required for blame, then the truth of Epistemic Coolness suggests that we do not engage in epistemic blame. This might indirectly put pressure on Epistemic Blameworthiness. It is true that blaming emotions might be *fitting* or *appropriate* responses to epistemic failure even if we never experience them. Still, it would be strange if we were epistemically blameworthy even though we never engage in epistemic blame. As a result, the defender of Epistemic Blameworthiness may wish to pursue a non-emotional account of blame in order to avoid this unpleasant consequence.

Boulton (2021a) adopts precisely this strategy. He concedes that judgments of epistemic failure are on the whole less emotional than judgments of moral failure. (To be clear, he remains neutral on the question of whether epistemic blame *can* involve blaming emotions.) Boulton aims to present a theory of epistemic blame that both is compatible with its comparative coolness and yet also accounts for its significance. The account that he offers is a relationship-based account of epistemic blame that is modeled on Scanlon’s account of moral blame.⁴ According to Scanlon, to blame someone is “to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate” (1998, pp. 128–9). To be blameworthy, on this account, is to have done something that is relationship-impairing and so to be deserving of such a response. For example, if a friend speaks ill of you, then they impair the friendship. You blame that person just in case you treat the relationship as being so impaired, perhaps by adjusting your expectations of what actions that friend will take in the future and being more hesitant to share personal information with them.

For Boulton (2021a, 2021b), the nature of epistemic blame is correspondingly found in the role that it plays in managing our epistemic relationships. This notion of an epistemic relationship is supposed to be motivated by the observations that, first, we *rely* on one another for informational purposes and, second, we have both normative and predictive *expectations* regarding how others conduct their intellectual lives. Just as our moral relationships can be impaired when someone violates moral standards, so too our epistemic relationships are supposedly impaired when someone violates epistemic standards. If we judge someone to be guilty of dogmatism or wishful thinking, we revoke our epistemic trust in that person’s testimony. This can occur without any

emotional response and yet, Boulton thinks, is weighty enough to give epistemic blame the relevant kind of significance.

In this way, Boulton diffuses the most obvious version of the challenge to Epistemic Blameworthiness from Epistemic Coolness. Epistemic blame, he argues, does not require emotional responses in order to attain significance. And if emotions are not required for epistemic blame, then Epistemic Coolness has no implications for whether we engage in epistemic blame or not. Thus, there is no problematic result for the defender of Epistemic Blameworthiness. My aim in the remainder of the paper is to show that there is another independent tension that arises between Epistemic Coolness and Epistemic Blameworthiness, a worry that does not depend on any particular account of blame. For the purposes of this argument, I will grant that there can be non-emotional forms of blame and that these forms of blame can possess the relevant kind of significance. In what follows, I will argue that even if we accept a non-emotion-based account of blame, such as the relationship-based account, there is still a lingering surprising consequence that follows from the conjunction of Epistemic Coolness and Epistemic Blameworthiness. This puts pressure on defenders of Epistemic Blameworthiness to show that epistemic blame does involve blaming emotions at least some of the time, even if blaming emotions are not necessary for epistemic blame itself.

3 | EMOTIONS AND PHENOMENALLY GRASPING THE EVALUATIVE

In this section, I propose a view of one of the epistemic roles of emotion. Building on Bourget's account of phenomenal grasping, I suggest that emotions allow us to phenomenally grasp (the evaluative aspect of) evaluative propositions, including propositions about blameworthiness.

To "grasp" a proposition in the way I will be discussing is to understand it in a certain way. One way to see what it is to grasp a proposition is to look at what Bourget (2017) calls "transition cases," where one goes from not grasping p to grasping p . In one such case, a student learns in school, and thereby comes to know, that the Sun is about 1,300,000 times the volume of the Earth (call this proposition $\langle \text{Sun/Earth} \rangle$) but does not yet *grasp* that fact on the basis of her teacher's testimony alone. But if the teacher displays to the class an apple seed next to a basketball and explains that the difference in volume between the two objects is similar to that between the Earth and the Sun, the child starts to grasp $\langle \text{Sun/Earth} \rangle$. According to Bourget, what enables the transition from mere knowledge to grasping is the phenomenal presentation of the proposition, in this case the visual experience of the ball next to the seed.

A second case is Jackson's (1986) Mary in her black-and-white room. On Bourget's interpretation, what happens when Mary leaves the room is that she comes to *grasp* that ripe tomatoes are red when that proposition is phenomenally presented to her in vision. (This is supposed to be in following with the physicalist reply to Jackson that claims that what Mary gains upon leaving the room is a new way of knowing.)

I will adopt Bourget's account of phenomenal grasping on which to *grasp* a proposition (p) is to have a phenomenal experience of p . While there are competing accounts of grasping, it is at least plausible that Bourget's account successfully identifies one epistemically valuable variety of grasping even if there are also others. Additionally, this account allows us to isolate an important epistemic role that emotions play with respect to evaluative propositions, both generally and in the case of moral blameworthiness.

It is intuitive that phenomenal grasping possesses epistemic value. While a full defense of this claim is a project for another paper, I will say a few words about why I find it plausible. Mostly, I

think the plausibility comes from cases of comparison. It seems that the person who both knows and grasps p is in a comparatively better epistemic situation than the person that merely knows but does not grasp p . For example, once the student has the visual experience of the ball and the seed, she seems to be in a better epistemic position with respect to $\langle \text{Sun/Earth} \rangle$. So, when paired with knowledge, grasping seems to possess some epistemic value over and above mere knowledge.⁵ I suspect that what is valuable about grasping is that it gives us a special kind of access to facts. What Mary gains when she leaves the room is not new knowledge. But that does not mean that what she gains is not epistemically valuable. Certain ways of representing put us in touch with the world in a special sort of way. I find it intuitive that these ways of representing are epistemically superior to others, although saying exactly what “being in touch” consists in and why it is valuable both need a great deal more elaboration.

Just as perception facilitates phenomenal grasping in the two cases above, I want to suggest that emotions allow us to phenomenally grasp certain evaluative propositions in a way that is also epistemically valuable. Claire may know that her mother’s death will be a loss for her (call this proposition $\langle \text{Mom} \rangle$). But this may not “hit her” until after her mother dies. When it does, Claire will feel a wave of sadness.⁶ Indeed, when the loss hits her, it seems to do so *by way of* the sadness. When she experiences sadness, the sadness itself phenomenally presents $\langle \text{Mom} \rangle$. This transition from merely knowing that her mother’s death is a loss to the phenomenal presentation of this fact when she feels sadness closely resembles the child’s transition from merely knowing that $\langle \text{Sun/Earth} \rangle$ to phenomenally grasping $\langle \text{Sun/Earth} \rangle$ when having the visual experience of the ball and the seed.

Furthermore, when Claire grasps $\langle \text{Mom} \rangle$ she is also in a better epistemic position with respect to $\langle \text{Mom} \rangle$. In particular, what the emotion phenomenally presents is the *evaluative aspect* of $\langle \text{Mom} \rangle$. It puts her in touch with her mother’s death *as a loss* and the loss-ish quality of the death becomes phenomenally evident to her. This in turn affords Claire a certain appreciation of the evaluative significance of her mother’s death that she lacked when she merely believed that her mother’s death was a loss to her.

This ability of an emotion to present evaluative facts to us in a phenomenal way generalizes quite well. On one standard view, the objects of emotions can be categorized into formal objects and particular objects.⁷ Each emotional attitude type (e.g., sadness, fear, pride, etc.) has its own *formal object*, which the emotion “aims at.” It may be helpful to think of the formal object of the emotion as the particular kind of value property that the emotion type tracks in the world. For sadness, this is loss. For fear, it is dangerousness. For pride, it is deserved accomplishment. The *particular object*, on the other hand, is what the emotion is directed toward in a specific case. It will allow for both propositional intentional objects (e.g., I am afraid that the bear will hurt me) as well as what de Sousa (1987) calls “target objects,” or entities (e.g., I am afraid of the bear). We can then characterize the correctness conditions of emotions in terms of these two kinds of object: an emotion gets things right just in case the particular object of the emotion is properly characterized in terms of its formal object. For example, my fear of the bear gets things right just in case the bear is in fact dangerous to me.⁸ This is a basic representationalist account of emotion that is accepted, for example, by perceptualists, judgmentalists, and attitudinalists about emotion.⁹ Roughly speaking, it is the proposition identified by these correctness conditions that an emotion phenomenally presents to the subject.¹⁰

(Emotional Grasping): Emotions phenomenally present evaluative propositions. The proposition presented by an emotion can be modeled as the proposition that o is F , where o is the emotion’s particular object and F is its formal object.

This picture of emotion fits especially well with accounts of emotion that emphasize the intentionality of the phenomenal experience of the emotion, such as Goldie's (2000) "feeling-toward."¹¹ I think it is also compatible with several other accounts of emotion. I say that the emotion *presents* a proposition rather than *represents* a proposition in order to remain as neutral as possible regarding the metaphysics of emotional states. However, the neutrality only goes so far. In order for emotions to be capable of phenomenal presentation in the way I describe, it must be the case that phenomenal aspect of the emotion is itself representational and not, for example, that there is a representational belief-like part of the emotion and a separate non-representational feeling part. I am hopeful that there are versions of, for example, judgmentalism, perceptualism, and attitudinalism that can meet this constraint, but ones that do not will be incompatible with my account.

The way that the emotion phenomenally presents its content is through the affective feel of the emotion. Similarly to how one can "just see" the size relation between two objects in one's perceptual experience (think of the <Sun/Earth> example), one can "just feel" the loss of a loved one in one's emotional experience of sadness. Emotional attitude types have characteristic phenomenal feels. Sadness feels one way, and anger feels another. Although sadness and anger are both negative emotions, one can tell from one's phenomenal experience whether one is experiencing sadness or anger.¹² If one has an emotional experience that has as its intentional object that one has been cheated on, it is evident to the subject, in normal circumstances, whether one feels *sad* or *angry* about being cheated on. One can ask oneself which of those things they are feeling, introspect, and come up with an answer on the basis of the emotional experience's phenomenal feel. This is consistent with the possibility of error if, for example, one is bad at introspection.

Furthermore, the phenomenal feel of each emotional experience presents the particular object of the emotional experience in some way. Different emotions take different perspectives toward the same particular object. If one feels angry about being cheated on, one has the emotional appearance as of being wronged by the infidelity. If one feels sad about it, one has the emotional appearance as of the infidelity's constituting a loss to them. It is because emotions phenomenally present their particular objects as possessing certain evaluative properties that they are capable of phenomenally presenting evaluative propositions. So, different emotional attitude types have different phenomenal feels that present the particular object of the emotion as possessing different evaluative properties. There is a correlation, then, between the phenomenal feel of the emotion and the intentionality of the emotion. (I remain neutral on the question of whether the phenomenology or intentionality grounds, or is more fundamental than, the other.)

An emotion's characteristic phenomenological feel notoriously includes a positive or negative *valence*. These valences are experienced as pleasurable or displeasurable qualities of experience respectively. Happiness, pride, and affection have positive valences (and are pleasurable). Fear, disgust, and anger have negative valences (and are displeasurable). Furthermore, the felt valence of the emotion accords with evaluative valence of the phenomenally presented proposition. When Claire feels sad about the death of her mother, that sadness presents the proposition that the mother's death is a loss to her, which evaluates the death as something bad. And the phenomenal feel of the sadness has a negative valence, which itself feels bad. The ability of emotions to match up valenced phenomenal feels with the ascription of similarly valenced evaluative properties seems crucial to their ability to phenomenally present evaluative propositions.¹³

Here are few additional examples to provide further intuitive support for Emotional Grasping:

- A PhD candidate knows that she has worked hard and has written a good dissertation. But, it is only after her PhD defense when she sees her mentor and family clapping for her that she phenomenally grasps the deserved achievement by feeling proud of her accomplishment.

- A longtime smoker knows that smoking is noxious to the human body. But, it is only when he sees a photograph of a smoker's lungs for the first time that he feels disgust and phenomenally grasps the noxiousness of smoking.
- A parent-to-be knows that having a child will present an enormous addition of value to their life. But it is only when they feel a sense of awe and love, perhaps when they hold the child for the first time, that they phenomenally grasp the way in which the child matters to them.

Before moving forward, a few clarifications are in order. The first is about the scope of Emotional Grasping, which is purposefully stated as a generic rather than a universal or a mere existential claim. I have stated it this way, because I think that this is the most plausible version of the claim. Thus, if it turns out that some emotions are not consciously experienced, and thus do not phenomenally present anything, this will not directly contradict Emotional Grasping. However, if it turns out that emotions only facilitate evaluative phenomenal grasping in a very few aberrant cases, then this would undermine Emotional Grasping.

Second, Bourget characterizes phenomenal grasping as a non-factive phenomenon; one can grasp a false proposition. But I think this feature of the theory could be reasonably disputed, particularly if one wants to claim that grasping has epistemic value. If grasping is non-factive, then even emotions that are inappropriate in the sense that they get things wrong about the world can facilitate grasping. If grasping is factive, however, then only appropriate (in the "truth-like" sense) emotions can facilitate grasping. I myself prefer the factive view. It sounds strange to me to say that the narcissist who is outraged that her friend missed her birthday party to take his sick child to the hospital grasps the wrongness of what her friend did. But, I think the issue of whether grasping is factive is orthogonal to the main issues considered here.

To recap, emotions seem to have the ability to phenomenally present us with evaluative propositions. When they do, the subject has a phenomenal experience of the emotion's particular object as possessing the evaluative property picked out by the emotion's formal object. In this experience, the phenomenal feel that is characteristic of the emotion type is directed toward the emotion's particular object, and the evaluative proposition is thereby phenomenally presented to the subject.

What the moral blaming emotions (e.g., anger, indignation, and guilt) seem to have in common is that they have moral blameworthiness as part of their formal object.¹⁴ One might be inclined to think that moral blaming emotions are concerned with moral *wrongness* rather than blameworthiness. This temptation should be resisted. One can perform a morally wrong action and remain blameless, for example when the subject is excused from blame because they were coerced. If and when excusing circumstances are brought to light, resentment, indignation, and the like tend to fade. The negative blaming emotions, then, respond to evidence of blameworthiness rather than wrongdoing. This suggests that, as fear has dangerousness as its formal object, moral blaming emotions have moral blameworthiness as theirs.

Moral blaming emotions, then, phenomenally present the subject with the proposition that the target of the emotion is morally blameworthy. When we feel angry with someone for stealing from us, we feel the offense that they have caused. When one feels guilty for yelling at a child, one feels one's own blameworthiness. These phenomenal presentations involve a felt negative valence which matches up with the negative evaluation made in the ascription of blameworthiness. This negative valence plays an important part in how the emotion can phenomenally present blameworthiness. Furthermore, the emotion brings these two things together in such a way that the felt negative valence is intentionally directed toward the emotion's target. It is not just that we judge someone to be blameworthy and simultaneously feel a negative feeling. It is that the negative feeling seems to be somehow *turned toward* the blameworthy individual. And this directing of the

negative feeling toward the instance of the negative evaluative property (here, blameworthiness) is essential to the emotion's ability to phenomenally present the evaluative.

In this section, I have argued that emotions can allow us to phenomenally grasp evaluative propositions and that moral blaming emotions allow us to phenomenally grasp propositions about moral blameworthiness. In the following section, I discuss the implications for epistemic blameworthiness.

4 | EMOTIONAL ABSENCE CASES

This section and the following defend the claim that without epistemic blaming emotions, we would not be in a position to grasp propositions about epistemic blameworthiness. In this section, I will present two cases (one real and one imaginary) in which subjects seem to lack phenomenal access to certain evaluative propositions in virtue of lacking a certain kind of emotional response. This section can be interpreted as an argument by analogy: If such-and-such subjects lack phenomenal access to propositions about V-values in virtue of lacking E-emotions, and if we are in a relevantly similar position to those subjects with respect to epistemic blameworthiness and epistemic blaming emotions, then we have reason to think that we lack phenomenal access to propositions about epistemic blameworthiness. Here are the cases.

4.1 | The woman with no fear

There are rare real life cases of individuals who lack a particular emotion type. One such individual is known in the literature as SM, who, due to damage to her amygdala is unable to experience fear in nearly all circumstances (Feinstein et al., 2011).¹⁵ Researchers exposed SM to various stimuli that are fear-inducing in normal subjects: dangerous animals at an exotic pet shop, a notoriously scary haunted house, and several horror films. SM displayed no behavioral signs of fear and, when questioned about her reaction to these stimuli, SM reported feeling excitement and curiosity but not fear.

Researchers also asked SM to complete an emotion diary in which she was asked to record her emotional state three times per day over a three month period. She only ever registered a minimal level of fear response, and scored a 0% for fear on a quantitative affective scale. Additionally, SM had experienced numerous highly dangerous incidents—such as being held up at knifepoint and gunpoint—toward which she experienced no fear (corroborated by police reports).

When SM viewed the horror films provided by the researchers, she remarked that most people would likely feel fear in response to the films. So she appears to have at least a minimal capacity to predict when others will feel fear even though she does not herself experience fear in such cases.

Unfortunately for philosophers, researchers did not ask SM whether she has phenomenal experiences of propositions about dangerousness. But it is very difficult to imagine how she could. It seems that, with respect to the dangerous, SM is very much like the student who knows <Sun/Earth> but does not phenomenally grasp it. When SM is held up at gunpoint, she presumably *knows* that this is a dangerous situation. She knows, after all, that the gun can kill her. But the negativity of the dangerousness is not presented to her, because she does not experience a negatively valenced emotion.

We can generate a transition case of the sort that Bourget describes if we imagine that SM has an operation that restores her fear response. When this happens, she will begin not only to believe

that she is in danger when she is held at gunpoint, but she will also grasp that she is in danger. She will come to have a phenomenal experience of the dangerousness of her situation, and this experience will allow her to appreciate the dangerousness in a new way.

4.2 | Angerless aliens

Now consider the following hypothetical scenario. Imagine a world of social aliens that are very much like us except that they lack blaming emotions. I call them *angerless aliens* for short, but it's crucial that they lack *all* blaming emotions (including, e.g., indignation, guilt, etc.). They possess other emotions including happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and even empathy. They also have social practices of, for example: revoking trust in a friend who breaks a promise, engaging in deterrence-motivated punishment, and preventing their children from spending time with people who harm or disrespect others.

We can assume, for the sake of argument, that the angerless aliens are in fact blameworthy when they act wrongly without excuse. We can even allow that they have a theory about blameworthiness, which they interpret as the appropriate application of the sort of relationship modifications described above (revoking trust and so on). They might also be entirely reliable in their application of their blameworthiness concept. What the aliens cannot do, however, is *phenomenally grasp* these facts about their blameworthiness.¹⁶ And this seems to be a direct result of the fact that they lack blaming emotions.

Like SM with respect to dangerousness, the angerless aliens, while they (on assumption) have knowledge of their blameworthiness, their blameworthiness is not phenomenally presented to them. And if for some reason they were to study humans and develop some sort of neural implant that allowed them to experience blaming emotions like ours, they would then—like SM—come to have a new appreciation for these evaluative facts about blameworthiness that they already knew but did not yet grasp. They would experience the offensiveness of their friend's betrayal in a new way upon feeling angry about it. And, once again, this emotional response seems to put them in touch with that evaluation in a way that is epistemically valuable.

4.3 | Us

Now, suppose that it is true that we do not experience emotional responses to epistemic failures. Suppose also, following relationship-based accounts, that we engage in epistemic blame by modifying our epistemic relationships with others. And suppose even that—similarly to the angerless aliens—these acts of blame are by and large warranted and that Epistemic Blameworthiness is true. Even if we grant all of this, then we are still in no better position than that of SM or the angerless aliens. We may be able to attribute epistemic blameworthiness to one another on the basis of the application of a theory (perhaps one extrapolated from our theory of moral blameworthiness). But we are not in a position to phenomenally grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness. In virtue of this, we are not in a position to appreciate the significance of these facts in the same way that we would be if we did phenomenally grasp them.

If Epistemic Coolness is true, then there remains an important difference between the moral and epistemic cases of blameworthiness. Even if a non-emotional account of blame, such as the relationship-based account, is true in both cases, in the moral case we still have blaming emotions, and these allow us to grasp facts about moral blameworthiness even if the neither the

notions of blame or blameworthiness themselves depend in any important way on emotions. But if Epistemic Coolness is true, then we are not in a position to phenomenally grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness.

5 | THE PHENOMENAL PRESENTATION OF EPISTEMIC BLAMEWORTHINESS

In the previous section, I argued on the basis of analogy with the case of SM and the angerless aliens that if we do not experience blaming emotions in response to epistemic blameworthiness, then we are not in a position to phenomenally grasp propositions about epistemic blameworthiness. I will call this claim Emotional Exclusivity.

(Emotional Exclusivity): If we do not possess epistemic blaming emotions, then we are not in a position to phenomenally grasp propositions about epistemic blameworthiness.¹⁷

Emotional Exclusivity is restricted to the property of epistemic blameworthiness. If Emotional Exclusivity is true, this might be explained by some broader principle that is restricted only to evaluative properties more generally, for example: if we do not possess emotions, then we are not in a position to phenomenally grasp evaluative propositions. But Emotional Exclusivity does not depend on the truth of this more general, and thus stronger, principle. I will focus here on defending the narrower claim since that will suffice for present purposes.

I use “not in a position to” rather than “cannot” because I want to refrain from any strong impossibility claims. If it is possible that we could have a chip installed in our brains that would suddenly allow for a range of epistemic blaming emotions, then it may be (metaphysically and nomologically) *possible* for us to phenomenally grasp epistemic blameworthiness. But, for those of us who lack such a chip, I maintain that we are not currently *in a position* to do so.

Before I continue with my defense of Emotional Exclusivity, it is worth distinguishing it from some other nearby claims that readers might be familiar with. First, Emotional Exclusivity is distinct from the claim that without emotion one cannot master the extension of an evaluative term.¹⁸ It is compatible with my claim that SM, for example, may learn how to masterfully apply the term “dangerous.” Similarly, I am granting here that even if we lack epistemic blaming emotions, we may still be able to correctly apply the term “epistemically blameworthy.”

Furthermore, Emotional Exclusivity is not meant to rule out that we could *know* facts about epistemic blameworthiness without blaming emotions. Again, SM might have knowledge about which things are dangerous and which are not, knowledge that could be based on testimony, some sort of theory about dangerousness, etc. My point is that we would lack the *phenomenal presentation* of those evaluative facts. It is thus compatible with Emotional Exclusivity, contra certain versions of moral sentimentalism, that we can know facts about blameworthiness without emotions.

With these clarifications in place, we are ready to get into the argument. The remainder of the section will proceed as follows. First, I attempt to isolate the features of emotions that make them apt for the phenomenal presentation of evaluative propositions. And second, I consider a series of other candidate mental state types that might be thought to be capable of phenomenally presenting facts about epistemic blameworthiness. I argue that in the end none of these other mental state types are promising candidates and thus we are left with no reason to think that

without blaming emotions we would be in a position to phenomenally grasp propositions about epistemic blameworthiness.

I will begin with some considerations about what is required for a mental state to be capable of phenomenally presenting evaluative propositions in the way that matters here. In order to be capable of phenomenally presenting evaluative propositions, a mental state must be able to both (a) present evaluative propositions and (b) do (a) in such a way that the evaluative property is phenomenally presented. In order for a mental state type to allow for the possibility of phenomenally grasping facts about blameworthiness, it must be the case that the mental state can (a) present evaluative propositions and (b) do (a) in such a way that the blameworthiness (as an evaluative property) is phenomenally presented. When it comes to the particular property of blameworthiness, the blaming emotions are perfectly suited to this role.

Consider again the moral blaming emotions. If emotions like anger, indignation, and guilt phenomenally present us with propositions about moral blameworthiness, then this satisfies condition (a). Moral blaming emotions also seem to satisfy condition (b). In my previous discussion of moral blaming emotions, I emphasized that the mere co-occurrence of the presentation of an evaluative presentation and a negatively valenced feeling would not suffice for phenomenal presentation of the evaluative. The feeling must be turned toward the evaluative claim in the right way. For example, if I have the thought that <the war is bad> and simultaneously have a pain in my elbow, the pain is negatively valenced but it does not phenomenally present the badness of the war. To the contrary, when I feel indignant toward someone for acting wrongly, the negative feeling experienced with the indignation is turned toward the moral blameworthiness that the emotion represents. This satisfies condition (b).

There are, if any, few mental states besides emotions that meet these two conditions. When we narrow our focus to consider evaluative propositions about blameworthiness (whether moral or epistemic), it seems that we lack reason for thinking that any mental states aside from blaming emotions satisfy both conditions (a) and (b). In the remainder of this section, I will consider various potential mental state types that may seem to be promising candidates for satisfying both conditions. I argue that none of them are likely to be successful and, thus, that we are justified in accepting Emotional Exclusivity.

5.1 | What about evaluative beliefs?

There are, of course, non-emotional mental states that present evaluative propositions, most notably beliefs: moral beliefs, prudential beliefs, aesthetic beliefs, epistemic beliefs, and many others (e.g., the belief that my pen is a good pen). If there is such thing as cognitive phenomenology, then beliefs may present these propositions in a phenomenal way. Nonetheless, I do not think that the cognitive phenomenology associated with occurrent beliefs or judgments is capable on its own of phenomenally presenting the proposition that one is (epistemically) blameworthy in the right way.

There are two reasons for doubting that the cognitive phenomenology associated with judging blameworthy is sufficient for the phenomenal presentation of blameworthiness. The first is that, even in non-evaluative cases one can judge that *p* without phenomenally grasping *p*. This is precisely what the student in the <Sun/Earth> example does when they form the initial belief on the basis of testimony. If we can judge that *p* without grasping that *p*, then whatever phenomenology is associated with judging that *p* is insufficient for grasping *p*. Thus, whatever cognitive

phenomenology is associated with judging blameworthy is insufficient for grasping propositions about blameworthiness.

But, things are even more dubious in the evaluative case. In order to phenomenally grasp an evaluative proposition in the way that matters here, the proposition must be presented in such a way that the evaluative aspect or component of the proposition is part of what is phenomenally presented. Imagine that you have in front of you a choropleth map of the world where lighter shades of red indicate lower rates of child hunger and darker shades indicate higher levels. It is true that the visual experience of this map phenomenally presents one with different relative magnitudes, but it does not phenomenally present the relative *badness* of these magnitudes. The phenomenal presentation of this evaluative aspect matters. Suppose that someone looked at such a map and had the corresponding visual experience. They claim on this basis to understand the proposition that child hunger in Madagascar is much worse than it is in France (<Madagascar/France>). On the face of it, this seems like an evaluative proposition. It features the word “worse,” and the context makes clear that the way in which it is worse is moral. But, if the person feels no relevant moral emotion (perhaps sympathy, pity, or even guilt), it is hard to think of them as grasping <Madagascar/France> *qua* evaluative proposition.

Even if there is something that it is like to judge that S is epistemically blameworthy, and even if this feeling could present the subject with some sort of phenomenal grasp of that proposition, it is implausible that the relevant phenomenal feeling is capable of phenomenally presenting the *evaluative aspect* of the blameworthiness evaluation, just as the visual experience of the map is incapable of presenting one with the evaluative aspect of <Madagascar/France>. As I have argued, the blaming emotions are well-placed to phenomenally represent this evaluative aspect because the negative valence of the emotion matches up with the negative evaluative valence of the blameworthiness attribution. But the cognitive phenomenology associated with judging someone blameworthy (assuming that there is some such thing) lacks a corresponding negative felt valence. We know this since, if Epistemic Coolness is true, then one can judge epistemically blameworthy without feeling an emotion. And it is difficult to see what other purely cognitive feeling would be capable of playing this role. If the angerless aliens took themselves to phenomenally grasp facts about moral blameworthiness on the basis of the cognitive phenomenology of their judgments of moral blameworthiness, we would be skeptical. In the moral case, it seems to be the emotion that does that work. We should expect the same in the epistemic case.

For these two reasons, it is implausible that the cognitive phenomenology associated with a judgment of blameworthiness, on its own, can phenomenally present propositions about blameworthiness (whether moral or epistemic).

5.2 | What about (rich) perception?

Moral perceptualists think that moral properties can be represented in perceptual experience. For example, we can “just see” what is the right thing to do in a certain situation or “just hear” the offensiveness in a sexist remark.¹⁹ Proponents of *moral perceptualism* might also be inclined to accept a corresponding theory in the epistemic domain, which we can call *epistemic perceptualism*. On such a view, it might be suggested, we can “just hear” the faulty reasoning in our colleague’s argument or “just see” the student’s mistake in the logic proof. Perhaps, then, epistemic blameworthiness could be one of the properties that gets perceptually represented.

First, it is worth pointing out that the kind of moral perceptualism according to which moral properties are literally presented in perception, what Werner (2020) calls “contentful moral

perception” is already a minority view. There are many versions of moral perceptualism. One view, from McGrath (2004), holds that perceptions can provide immediate justification for moral beliefs. This view has no direct implications for whether perception can phenomenally present moral concepts. On another view, which Werner calls “affect-based” moral perception, the way that we perceive moral properties is by way of our emotional responses. This sort of view, of course, presents no counterexample and indeed even fits nicely with my claim that there is no phenomenal presentation of epistemic blameworthiness without epistemic blaming emotions.

Let us restrict our focus, then, to versions of moral perceptualism according to which moral properties are represented in perception. One compelling argument against this sort of view comes from Huemer (2005). Huemer claims that in order to (visually) perceive something, there must be a way that thing looks. But, there is no way that wrongful actions look. And so, wrongful action cannot be (literally) perceived. Although defenders of moral perception have provided responses, I find Huemer’s objection convincing.²⁰ But the problem is even more salient in the case of *blameworthiness*. This is because if it is implausible that there is a look that *wrongful* actions have, it is even less plausible that there is a look that *blameworthy* actions have. This is because in order for a person to be blameworthy for an action, in addition to the action being wrong, it must be the case that the person does not meet any excusing conditions. And there is good reason to think that in many cases evidence of these excusing conditions will not be visually available.

One final problem for the strategy of extending moral perceptualism to account for the perceptual representation of epistemic blameworthiness is that even if perception can present moral properties, it would need to be shown that the perception of moral properties is not mediated by the emotional presentation of those same properties. For example, we would need to be capable of phenomenally presenting moral blameworthiness in perceptual experience even if we did not have moral blaming emotions. If this is not the case, then there is little precedent for thinking that evaluative properties that are not first presented in emotional experience can be perceptually phenomenally presented. And this is what would be necessary in the case of epistemic blameworthiness (assuming that Epistemic Coolness is true). For these reasons, the case for perceptual presentation of epistemic blameworthiness is weak.

5.3 | What about (frustrated) desires?

Another suggestion is that frustrated desires may allow us to phenomenally grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness. For this suggestion to succeed, it would have to be the case that desires both (a) present propositions about epistemic blameworthiness and (b) do so in a way that epistemic blameworthiness (as an evaluative property) is phenomenally presented. Let’s start with (a). According to some views, desires are representations of value. Oddie (2005), for example, argues that desires are appearances of goodness. These appearances are distinct from beliefs but nonetheless present their contents as being good. This, Oddie thinks, can explain why there seems to be some tension (though not a contradiction) in believing that a course of action is the best one without desiring to take it. Perhaps on this sort of view, desires could represent epistemic blameworthiness as bad in cases where one desires that someone would not have believed badly.

This representational account of desire could then be paired with a *two-tier account* of blame. According to Sher (2006), moral blame occurs when the subject believes that someone behaved badly and desires that they hadn’t behaved badly. Brown (2020b) argues for a parallel account of epistemic blame according to which epistemic blame occurs when the subject believes that someone believed badly and desires that they hadn’t believed badly. For both Sher and Brown, blame

typically involves certain characteristic dispositions, e.g., to feel certain emotions, perform certain behaviors, etc. But what unifies these dispositions is that they are the ordinary consequences of these key belief-desire pairs. Someone who accepts both a two-tier account of blame and a representational account of desire may be happy to say that when has a desire that so-and-so had not believed badly, that they represent that person as being epistemically blameworthy, thereby fulfilling condition (a).

Although this pair of positions is already controversial, I will accept for the sake of argument that desires are capable of satisfying condition (a). What I will contest is that desires can satisfy condition (b), the ability to phenomenally present blameworthiness as an evaluative property. First, it is important to distinguish between what Heathwood (2019) calls “desire in the genuine-attraction sense” and “behavioral desire.”²¹ The first, which I will call *phenomenal desire*, involves feeling attracted to the object of desire and being excited by it. The second, which I will call *functional desire*, is the kind of desire that is directly connected with action in the sense that it disposes the person to act in a way that fulfills the desire. Since the latter need not even be the sort of thing that is experienced by the subject, it is clear that if desire is going to phenomenally present anything, it must be a phenomenal desire.

Given that we are allowing that frustrated phenomenal desires represent the absence of the desired object as bad, I think that it is probably correct to say that phenomenal desires could allow for the phenomenal grasping of certain evaluative facts.²² For example, suppose that I have a strong phenomenal desire to drink some coffee. And suppose that, having woken up early in the morning before the shops open to find my coffee container empty, I am in a position where I have no access to coffee. The frustration of this phenomenal desire represents my lack of access to coffee as bad, and it also does this in a way such that the evaluative property, badness, is presented in a phenomenal way, since the frustration of the desire has a felt negative valence.²³ And so it seems that a desire theorist of this sort can account for phenomenal grasping of *some* evaluative propositions.

But can the desire theorist account for the phenomenal grasping of evaluative propositions about *blameworthiness* specifically? It seems to me that they cannot. According to the representational account of desire that we have been working with, the only evaluative properties that can be presented by the desire are general goodness for the subject (in the case of satisfied desire) or badness for the subject (in the case of frustrated desire). It seems that goodness and badness, then, are the *only* evaluative properties that desire is capable of phenomenally presenting.²⁴ In particular, it does not seem that desires are in a position to phenomenally present the property of blameworthiness, whether moral or epistemic. Of course, as Sher (ibid., 104) points out, in many cases the frustration of desire will in fact elicit various negative emotions which are capable of phenomenally presenting more specific evaluative properties, but these emotions are distinct from the frustrated desire itself.

Consider again the angerless aliens. Suppose that one of the angerless aliens, let's call her Eileen, has a phenomenal desire that her brother not act badly. She learns that her brother has assaulted someone, and so her desire is frustrated. On our working account of desire, Eileen's frustrated desire phenomenally presents her brother's assaulting someone as *bad*, but it does not phenomenally present it as *blameworthy*. This is true even if Eileen has a theory of moral blameworthiness according to which her brother clearly counts as blameworthy for the assault, and even if she has successfully applied that theory and formed the belief that her brother is blameworthy. This is because frustrated desire can only *phenomenally* present the evaluative property of badness. In order to phenomenally present the evaluative property of *blameworthiness* specifically, we need a mental attitude type that is capable of phenomenally presenting more

specific evaluative properties. In the case of moral blameworthiness, these are the blaming emotions.

In sum, with the right combination of views, it may be possible that frustrated desires can facilitate the phenomenal grasping of badness. But, they cannot facilitate grasping of more specific evaluative properties such as blameworthiness.

I have now considered and dismissed the most plausible options for non-emotional phenomenal presentations of epistemic blameworthiness. Absent other promising candidates, it seems that we are justified in accepting Emotional Exclusivity. We have no reason to think that without epistemic blaming emotions we would be capable of phenomenally grasping propositions about epistemic blameworthiness.

6 | CONCLUSION

Even if we accept a non-emotion-based account of epistemic blame, there is still a sort of discomfort that one might feel toward the conjunction of Epistemic Blameworthiness and Epistemic Coolness. I have tried in this paper to articulate the source of that discomfort. My suggestion is that what we feel uneasy about is that if Epistemic Coolness is true, then we cannot phenomenally grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness, just as Mary cannot grasp facts about redness, SM about dangerousness, and the angerless aliens about moral blameworthiness.

Of course, it does not follow directly that either Epistemic Coolness or Epistemic Blameworthiness must be rationally rejected or that relationship-based accounts (or other non-emotion-based accounts) of epistemic blame are false. How best to react to my conclusion will depend on one's prior theoretical commitments.

For someone who holds strongly both Epistemic Blameworthiness and Epistemic Coolness, the rational response may be to bite the bullet and deny that we can phenomenally grasp epistemic blameworthiness even though we are epistemically blameworthy.

Someone who holds strongly Epistemic Blameworthiness but is more uncertain about Epistemic Coolness may wish to reconsider the latter claim and investigate whether it might be the case that we do in fact experience epistemic blaming emotions of some sort.²⁵ More work would then need to be done to provide an account of those blaming emotions. Or else, they would need to show that phenomenal presentation of propositions about epistemic blameworthiness is possible without blaming emotions.

Someone who holds strongly Epistemic Coolness but who is less convinced about Epistemic Blameworthiness might, in conjunction with a prior expectation that epistemic blameworthiness would come with a means for phenomenally grasping its significance, be inclined to reduce their confidence in the claim that we are epistemically blameworthy.²⁶ One possibility here would be to accept Kauppinen's (2018) suggestion that we opt for epistemic *accountability* in lieu of epistemic *blame*.

Part of the issue, I expect, comes down to the role that one takes the notion of epistemic blameworthiness to play. If epistemic blameworthiness is merely some sort of conceptual placeholder in one's overall epistemic theory that seems necessary in order to get the theory going (e.g., in a deontological theory of epistemic norms), then it may not seem to be a major concession to admit that we are unable to grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness. But if epistemic blameworthiness is supposed to be something more robust, something that one takes to be part of our ordinary practices and something that we care about, then the thought that we do not phenomenally grasp epistemic blameworthiness might start to seem more perplexing. And this may push one toward

exploring one of the latter two options outlined above—either rejecting Epistemic Coolness or Epistemic Blameworthiness.

It is not my aim in this paper to argue for one of these approaches over the others. But, two upshots do strike me as notable. The first is that there is something curious about the idea that there is a kind of blameworthiness that we regularly instantiate but are incapable of phenomenally grasping. It is strange to think of ourselves as being just like the angerless aliens in the epistemic domain.

The second is that if Epistemic Coolness implies that we cannot phenomenally grasp facts about epistemic blameworthiness, this extends the disanalogy between moral and epistemic blameworthiness. Not only is it the case that moral blame is typically emotional and epistemic blame is not, but it is also the case that moral blameworthiness is graspable (by us) and epistemic blameworthiness is not. This may call into question certain parallels that one may wish to draw between the moral and epistemic domains. Both of these points are, I think, interesting and deserving of further consideration.

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ENDNOTES

¹Cf. Brown (2020b).

²Brown (2020a) and Schmidt (2024) suggest that epistemic blame, like moral blame, *can* be accompanied by emotional responses, whereas Boulton (2021a, 2021b) seems more open the possibility that Epistemic Coolness is true. Kauppinen (2018) argues that emotions are *not* part of the characteristic response to epistemic accountability and that this is *dissimilar* to moral blame.

³Cf Wallace (2011).

⁴Schmidt (2021, 2024) also defends a relationship-based account of epistemic blame, and Kauppinen (2018) has a similar account of epistemic accountability.

⁵Grasping may additionally have some instrumental epistemic benefit. For example, the student who has grasped <Sun/Earth> may be in a better position to form further true beliefs than the one who merely knows <Sun/Earth>. This is an interesting idea, but it is a more speculative empirical claim that I will set aside for present purposes.

⁶I use sadness rather than grief because it is controversial whether grief is an emotion.

⁷This view goes back to Kenny (1963). The basics of this characterization are widely accepted among emotion theorists.

⁸One might also think that the particular object also needs to exist (in the target case) or be true (in the propositional case). De Sousa (2002) argues against this extra condition. I will set this question aside for the purposes of this article.

⁹Defenders of perceptualism include Prinz (2004) and Tappolet (2016). Defenders of judgmentalism and neo-judgmentalism include Solomon (1973), Nussbaum (2001), and Brady (2013). Deonna and Teroni (2012) defend attitudinalism. The view I aim to articulate here does not require judgmentalism so long as there is some sense in which perceptions can present a proposition to the subject. Indeed, something along these lines will need to be the case in order for Bourget's view of perceptual grasping to get off the ground. If propositions can be phenomenally presented in perception, then a perceptual theory of emotion should be able to model the presentation of evaluative propositions on this.

¹⁰This is a bit of an oversimplification since the contents of emotional experience are probably more fine-grained than this, just as the contents of perceptual experience are more fine-grained than perceptual beliefs. Cf Tappolet (2020).

- ¹¹ See also Helm (2009) and Mitchell (2021).
- ¹² Cf. Mitchell (2021) on emotions as “experiential modes.”
- ¹³ There may also be some atypical emotions that have both positive and negative felt valences, e.g., nostalgia. This is fine so long as the evaluative proposition made by the emotion also contains a double valence, as is plausible with nostalgia.
- ¹⁴ I say “part of” because there will also need to be additional parts that distinguish those emotions from one another, for example, that guilt is self-directed.
- ¹⁵ The one exception that researchers found was the fear of asphyxiation when exposed to CO₂. The explanation for this is that this particular fear response bypasses the normal fear pathway involving the amygdala (Feinstein et al., 2013).
- ¹⁶ One might wonder whether some other mental state, such as a desire to not be blameworthy, could facilitate grasping here. This suggestion is addressed in the following section.
- ¹⁷ An alternative here would be to talk about the inability to grasp the *concept* of epistemic blameworthiness. I have chosen to follow Bourget in talking in terms of grasping propositions.
- ¹⁸ Cf. McDowell (1981)
- ¹⁹ See Werner (2020) for an overview of moral perceptualism. This is connected to views about cognitive penetration and rich perception. See, for example, Siegel (2016).
- ²⁰ For responses, see Cullison (2010) and McBrayer (2010).
- ²¹ Elsewhere, Heathwood (2022) uses “experiential” and “behavioral.”
- ²² I am using “frustrated phenomenal desire” to indicate the phenomenal state of feeling badly about how things are due to the actual state-of-affairs being contrary to one’s desires. Heathwood (2022) has argued that we must introduce a notion of “aversion satisfaction” to properly characterize this phenomenon for the purposes of desire satisfaction theories of well-being. For those who share this concern “frustrated desire” can be easily swapped for “satisfied aversion.”
- ²³ There is a genuine question here regarding whether the positive and negative valences accompanied by desire satisfaction and frustration can be fully accounted for without appeal to emotion states, but I set this question aside for present purposes.
- ²⁴ This observation points toward the suggestion that perhaps what is so special about emotions in general, at least from an epistemic standpoint, is that they facilitate the phenomenal grasping of *thick* evaluative properties. If frustrated desires can phenomenally present any evaluative properties at all, they seem to be only *thin* evaluative properties.
- ²⁵ Cf. Brown (2020a, 2020b).
- ²⁶ See Smartt (2023) for an argument for skepticism about epistemic blame.

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