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## Desire-as-belief and evidence sensitivity

*(Deseo-como-creencia y sensibilidad a la evidencia)*

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Abstract: Alex Gregory (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2021) provides an ingenious, systematic defence of the view that desires are a species of belief about normative reasons. This view explains how desires make actions rationally intelligible. Its main rival, which is attractive for the same reason, says that desires involve a quasi-perceptual appearance of value. Gregory (2017a; 2018; 2021) has argued that his view provides the superior explanation of how desires are sensitive to evidence. Here, I show that the quasi-perceptual view fares better in this regard. Negatively, I argue that Gregory's view overestimates the evidence-sensitivity of desires and implies that we are systematically mistaken in having different attitudes about desires and beliefs. Positively, I argue that quasi-perceptual appearances of value are brought into the scope of rational control through their dependence on prior representational states. I also provide a novel explanation of why some kinds of desires are resistant to rational control. I propose that desires are produced through exercises of an affective capacity to discriminate value. Variations in the way this capacity is exercised, and its links to prior representational states, can produce systematic insensitivity to evidence in certain kinds of desires. This paper advances the debate around desire on two fronts: first, it performs the neglected task of showing how the quasi-perceptual view can *simultaneously* explain both the sensitivity and insensitivity to evidence exhibited by desires and, second, it shows how the explanation offered is superior to one of its closest rivals, the view that desires are a species of normative belief.

Keywords: desire; belief; desire-as-belief; practical reasoning; the guise of the good

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*Resumen:* Alex Gregory (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2021) plantea una ingeniosa y sistemática defensa de la tesis de que los deseos son tipos de creencias sobre razones normativas. Esta tesis explica cómo los deseos hacen inteligibles a las acciones racionales. Su principal rival, que resulta atractiva por la misma razón, sostiene que los deseos involucran una apariencia cuasi-perceptual de valor. Gregory (2017a; 2018; 2021) ha argumentado que su propuesta ofrece una mejor explicación de cómo los deseos son sensibles a la evidencia. Mi propósito es mostrar que la propuesta cuasi-perceptual es igualmente exitosa en este aspecto. De manera negativa, argumento que la propuesta de Gregory sobreestima la sensibilidad a la evidencia de los deseos, e implica que estamos sistemáticamente equivocados al tener actitudes diferentes sobre deseos y creencias. De forma positiva, argumento que las apariencias cuasi-perceptuales de valor caen bajo control racional a través de su dependencia de otros estados representacionales previos. También proporciono una explicación novedosa de por qué algunos tipos de deseos son resistentes al control racional. Propongo que los deseos se producen mediante ejercicios de una capacidad afectiva de discriminación de valores. Variaciones en el modo en que esta capacidad es ejercida, y sus conexiones con estados representacionales previos, pueden generar insensibilidad sistemática a la evidencia en ciertos tipos de deseos. Este artículo contribuye al debate sobre deseos en dos frentes: primero, lleva a cabo la tarea de mostrar cómo la propuesta cuasi-perceptual puede explicar simultáneamente tanto la sensibilidad como la insensibilidad a la evidencia manifestada por los deseos; en segundo lugar, muestra cómo la explicación ofrecida es superior a la de uno de sus principales rivales, la propuesta de que los deseos son tipos de creencias normativas.

*Palabras clave:* deseo; creencia; deseo-como-creencia; razonamiento práctico; el aspecto de lo bueno

Short summary: This paper argues against the view that desires are a species of belief and in favour of the view that desires are analogous to perception. I show how the former view overestimates the evidence-sensitivity of desires while the latter view can, when formulated correctly, provide a satisfying explanation of how desires respond to evidence.

## 1. Introduction

This paper critically compares two views of desire that share the same basic motivation. The first view, recently defended by Alex Gregory (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2021), says that a desire to  $\varphi$  consists in a belief that one has a normative reason to  $\varphi$ . Gregory calls this view “desire-as-belief” (DAB). The second view says that a desire to  $\varphi$  represents  $\varphi$ -ing as good in some respect in a manner analogous to perception (Hawkins 2008; Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005; Schafer 2013; Smithies & Weiss 2019; Stampe 1987). Call this view “perceptualism.”<sup>1</sup> Both views explain why it is rationally intelligible to  $\varphi$  on the basis of a desire to  $\varphi$ .<sup>2</sup> On both views, a desire to  $\varphi$  represents a reason to  $\varphi$  which the agent can adopt as their basis for  $\varphi$ -ing.<sup>3</sup> Gregory (2017a, pp. 212-115; 2018, pp. 1065-1070; 2021, pp. 87-93) has argued that, compared to perceptualism, DAB provides a superior explanation of how desires are sensitive to evidence concerning the object of desire, especially evidence about whether there is a reason to  $\varphi$ . When an agent desires to  $\varphi$  the formation and regulation of her desire is sensitive to the agent’s available evidence concerning whether there is reason to  $\varphi$  or the value of  $\varphi$ -ing. Beliefs are sensitive to evidence in a number of familiar ways, and if desires just are beliefs, then we have a ready explanation of the evidence-sensitivity of desires. Gregory (2017a, pp. 212-115; 2018, pp. 1064-1070; 2021, pp. 87-93) argues that perceptualism fails primarily because it predicts that desires would be less sensitive to evidence than they really are.<sup>4</sup> For example, we appear to be able to reason our way into feeling a desire (under certain circumstances) and reason our way out of a desire (again, under certain circumstances). It seems we cannot reason our way into, or out of, perceptual experiences. So, the argument goes, perceptualism cannot possibly provide a complete and true account of the nature of desire.

This paper responds to Gregory’s arguments and, in the process, shows how perceptualism provides a superior explanation of desire’s evidence-sensitivity. I introduce some reasons to be pessimistic about DAB on its own terms: generally speaking, it overestimates the evidence-sensitivity of desires and implies that we are systematically mistaken in holding different attitudes toward our beliefs and desires. I then focus on making two positive contributions to the debate. First, I show how a widely acknowledged idea – namely, that desires depend on prior representational states – can be taken in a new direction to give us an account of how desires are indirectly sensitive to evidence. Roughly, the idea is that the acquisition of evidence can influence the set of representational states on which a desire depends, which then in turn modifies the content of that desire. Second, I provide an account of how desires are produced and regulated which also explains how desires can be *insensitive* to evidence.<sup>5</sup> I propose that desires result from the exercise

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<sup>1</sup> Perceptualism does not necessarily hold that the object of desire is an action. I simply adopt this formulation for ease of comparison between DAB and perceptualism.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory discusses this motivation in detail in his (2018) and (2021, especially chapter 4). All of the above cited perceptualists explicitly motivate their accounts in terms of its ability to explain how rationally intelligible action could be possible.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the important differences there might be between representing reasons and representing values, I will treat the two as equivalent for my purposes since either would be sufficient for rationally intelligible action.

<sup>4</sup> In the cited passages Gregory attacks a view he calls “presentationalism” which is a more general version of the view I call “perceptualism.” Since perceptualism is included within the broader category of presentationalism, I will characterise Gregory’s arguments as aimed at perceptualism for ease of exposition.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to discuss the mechanism by which desires are produced and regulated for the purposes of explaining evidence-insensitivity. I have here provided an account I think is most plausible, however, (as the reviewer pointed out) there are potentially a wide variety of possible accounts that could be fitted into perceptualism.

of an affective capacity to discriminate value.<sup>6</sup> Variations in the ways such a capacity gets exercised, and its connections to the representational bases for desires, explains why some kinds of desires fall outside the scope of rational control and while others are amenable to reasoning. My two proposals, when taken together, show how perceptualism provides a more convincing explanation of *both* the sensitivity and insensitivity to evidence exhibited by desires.

## 2. Rational Intelligibility

The two competing views I consider are principally motivated by their ability to explain how desires make actions rationally intelligible.<sup>7</sup> Advocates of both views hold that actions based on desires are paradigmatically intelligible to the acting agent as based on some apparent reason(s) in favour of so acting.<sup>8</sup> The reasoning behind this position, in broad outline, is as follows. We first take a case of an action that is, from the perspective of the acting agent, rationally unintelligible.<sup>9</sup> An action is rationally unintelligible when it altogether lacks a basis in any apparent reason. Then, we consider what that case would be like were it to involve acting on the basis of a desire. We then find that the action would indeed become rationally intelligible. The inference is then drawn that desires have a rationalising content or somehow represent a reason that can be taken up by an agent as the basis for a rationally intelligible action. Let us examine how this I supposed to work in a bit more detail with reference to a classic case of unintelligible action from Warren Quinn (2012, pp. 236-237). Quinn's case can be paraphrased like this:

*Radioman.* Radioman is disposed to turn on every radio he sees. He does not want to turn on radios nor does he believe that turning on radios is worthwhile. Turning on radios is not the means to any end which Radioman cares about. Radioman does not feel discomfort if he cannot turn on radios and turning on radios provides no satisfaction. Radioman simply finds himself disposed to turn on radios.

Intuitively, Radioman's disposition to turn on radios would not be the sort of thing that, from Radioman's own perspective, would appear to count in favour of turning on radios. His turning on a radio would not be intelligible as a rational action because it altogether lacks any apparent rational basis. Our actions are not like this when we act on a desire (at least paradigmatically). Rather, paradigmatically, when we act on a desire, we act with the (perhaps implicit or inchoate) sense that we can account for our conduct – that we seem to have *some* rational basis for acting. A theory of desire ought to explain, or explain away, why a desire can furnish an action with an apparently rational basis.

One particularly promising approach to explaining how desires can rationalise actions is the guise of the good thesis. The guise of the good says that a desire to  $\varphi$  represents  $\varphi$ -ing as good in some respect (Alvarez 2010; Anscombe 1957; Boyle & Lavin 2010; Brewer 2009; Clark 2010; Davidson 2001; Hawkins 2008; Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005; 2009; 2015; 2017; 2018; Schafer 2013; Smithies & Weiss 2019; Stampe

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<sup>6</sup> My account is analogous to capacity-based theories of perceptual experience. The account draws on the capacist accounts of perceptual experience provided by Susanna Schellenberg (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b) and John McDowell (2011; 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See Gregory (2021) for a comprehensive discussion of the specific motivations for his desire-as-belief view.

<sup>8</sup> Similar considerations apply to the relationship between desires and intentions, and desires and various forms of judgment. I focus on the connection between desire and action for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of such cases, see Boswell (2018, pp. 8-9), Hawkins (2008, pp. 247, 260), Johnston (2001, p. 190), Scanlon (1998, pp. 38, 43), Schapiro (2009, pp. 234-239; 2014, pp. 134-143; 2021, pp. 61-67), and Smithies and Weiss (2019, pp. 32-40).

1987; Tenenbaum 1999; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2018).<sup>10</sup> Variations of this view hold that desires represent reasons (Gregory 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2021; Scanlon 1998) or that desires represent deontic properties, that is, represent  $\varphi$ -ing as something that ought to be (Lauria 2017; Massin 2017; Meinong 1972). For my purposes, I assume that any of these options concerning the content of desires could provide an adequate explanation of rational intelligibility. Suppose that instead of a brute disposition to turn on radios, Radioman has a desire which represents the action as good in some respect. Suppose the smooth motion of turning the dial on the radio is represented as pleasantly satisfying. Intuitively, Radioman's action becomes rationally intelligible because his desire provides him with an awareness of a reason to go ahead and turn the dial. Similar explanations can be provided by any view which holds that a desire to  $\varphi$  represents  $\varphi$ -ing in a positive manner.<sup>11</sup> For example, the pleasant satisfaction of turning the radio dial might be presented as a reason for action, or a state that ought to be brought about.

Once we have accepted this general strategy to explain rational intelligibility, we are faced with the task of choosing between competing ways of accounting for the normative content of desires. Here, I will take for granted that desires rationalise by virtue of their evaluative content. The central point of contention will be whether we can accept the broader implications of a specific view of the nature of that content. I will turn to discuss Gregory's argument that DAB is a better way of explaining the evaluative content of desires because it has the right implications for the evidence-sensitivity of desires. I will then argue that perceptualism is superior on that score.

### 3. *Desire-As-Belief*

Alex Gregory (Gregory 2017a, pp. 201-202; 2018, p. 1073; 2021, pp. 10-13, pp. 75-87) explains the rational intelligibility of desire-based actions by saying that a desire to  $\varphi$  *just is* a belief that one has a normative reason to  $\varphi$ .<sup>12</sup> This view provides an elegant explanation of rational intelligibility. Radioman's action is unintelligible because he does not believe that there is any reason to turn on radios.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, when Radioman does desire to turn on radios, that case involves Radioman believing that he has a reason to so act. Desires are *guaranteed* to furnish an action with at least some apparent rational basis because to desire to  $\varphi$  simply is to believe that one has a reason to  $\varphi$ . It is easy to see how DAB succeeds in explaining the rational intelligibility of desire-based actions. However, it may not be altogether obvious how to understand the proposal that desires are beliefs. Desires and beliefs seem to be distinct mental states: intuitively, one can desire to  $\varphi$  without believing that one should  $\varphi$ , and one can believe they should  $\varphi$  without wanting to. We need some criterion for individuating desires as a *subclass* of beliefs. In fact, Gregory denies that every

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<sup>10</sup> I will assume that it is not decisively important for our purposes whether the content of desires concerns reasons or value. Either would be sufficient to explain rational intelligibility. As noted above, the object of desire need not be an action but could be an object, state of affairs, or any other ontological category that is the potential bearer of value. I stick with the formulation in terms of actions for ease of exposition.

<sup>11</sup> Some advocates of the guise of the good say that it is the *attitude* of desire, rather than its content, which provides an agent with an awareness of value, see Schafer (2013) and Tenenbaum (2018). I ignore this complication in what follows because this view can arguably provide a structurally similar explanation of rational intelligibility. Both the content and attitude view appear to accept that actions are rationally intelligible due to the reflective accessibility of value, while they disagree about how value is made consciously available to agents.

<sup>12</sup> As Gregory (2021, p. 10 footnote 5) notes, similar views have been defended in Campbell (2018), McNaughton (1988), and Little (1997). In Gregory's (2017a, 201) he cites Humberstone (1987), McDowell (1998), Lauria (2017), and Massin (2017) as holding views similar to DAB. For discussion of the general idea of desires as beliefs, see Lewis (1988) and Price (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Quinn (2012) provides a similar diagnosis. However, he does not unambiguously endorse the desire-as-belief thesis.

normative belief is a desire (Gregory 2017a, pp. 209-211; 2021, pp. 10-13). So, desires are supposed to be an even narrower class, namely, a subclass of normative beliefs. Gregory proposes that desires are those normative beliefs about reasons for action that hold the right kind of connection with being motivated to act (Gregory 2017a, pp. 207-208; 2021, chapter 2). Desires are beliefs about normative reasons to act that involve some motivational disposition to act, although this disposition does not need to be manifested (Gregory 2017a, pp. 207-208; 2021, pp. 30-35). So, an agent might possess a desire for P that lays dormant, so to speak, and never impacts their motivations, if the triggering conditions for that desire's motivational disposition are never realised. Other species of normative belief altogether lack any disposition to act. A conspicuous feature of this account is that it implies that desires do not essentially have any affective character or "feel" (Gregory 2017a, pp. 205-207; 2021, especially chapter 7). On this view, a desire is essentially non-affective but might contingently come with an associated phenomenology.

Although DAB provides an elegant explanation of rational intelligibility, it does not obviously align with many of our pre-theoretical intuitions about the nature of desires. Gregory recognises this and has provided an ingenuous defence of this view on a number of fronts. The central motivation for DAB in our dialectical context is that desires are sensitive to evidence about the value of prospective states (Gregory 2017a, pp. 202-205; 2018, pp. 1064-1070; 2021, pp. 82-93).<sup>14</sup> According to Gregory (2021, p. 86):

desires are influenced by evidence just as other beliefs are, and in turn that is a good explanation of why they rationalize actions: because they have the function of being sensitive to evidence about what you have reason to do. (Gregory 2021, p. 86)

The idea is that desires are responsive to evidence concerning what one has reason to do in a way that is so strongly analogous to how normative beliefs are sensitive to such evidence that the best explanation of this parallel is that desires *just are* a kind of normative belief. For example, I might experience a desire for a cup of coffee, recall that it would be my third cup before noon, infer that a third coffee before noon would make me nauseated, and so my desire for a cup of coffee would evaporate. It looks like my desire for a cup of coffee has responded directly to evidence about the desirability of the relevant prospect. A belief about normative reasons for action would be sensitive to such evidence in much the same way: an agent rationally ought to revise her belief that she has a reason to drink a coffee in light of the evidence that it would only make her nauseated. This parallel lends *prima facie* support to DAB.

Gregory (2017a, pp. 212-215; 2018, pp. 1064-1070; 2021, pp. 87-93) further claims that the evidence-sensitivity of desires shows that desires cannot involve quasi-perceptual appearances of value.<sup>15</sup> Gregory (2017a, p. 214) argues that "the very point of appearances is that they remain despite deliberation and testimony: they involve an external imposition on us over which we have no rational control." Consider,

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory also cites other motivations; however, they are not directly relevant to the present dialectical setting. The other motivations are (1) that DAB allows us to consistently maintain *both* that judgments about normative reasons directly motivate *and* that only desires motivate us to act (2017a, p. 202) and (2) that DAB resolves the question of whether our practical reasons depend ultimately on our beliefs about reasons or on our desires (2017a, p. 203). DAB allows us to say that, in a sense, both positions are right since our desires *just are* beliefs about reasons.

<sup>15</sup> Another motivation for DAB is that the thesis explains why we regard some desires as irrational (Gregory 2018, pp. 1066-68; 2021, pp. 23, 89-90). The idea is that desires can exhibit many of the failures of irrational beliefs simply because they are a species of belief. However, Gregory's discussion concerns the irrationality of *a process of reasoning* or the incoherence of a *set* of mental states. There is no explicit statement that desires are, or could be, *intrinsically* irrational in the sense of being irrational independently of its connection to other mental states or its role in a process of reasoning. Perceptualism, in parallel, can say that desires are irrational when any belief based on that desire would lead to an incoherent set of mental states or an irrational process of reasoning. So, it looks like perceptualism is at least equal to DAB on this score. However, this topic obviously deserves a far more detailed treatment than I can provide here.

for instance, a visual illusion. When an agent experiences the Müller-Lyer illusion, the contents of her illusory experience cannot be corrected by the agent's knowledge that the lines are of equal length. The visual illusion is an "external imposition" into the agent's mental economy that cannot be corrected or amended by processes internal to that mental economy. Notice that Gregory in the above passage provides a definition of appearances: an appearance is *by definition* a state that is insensitive to evidence, an "external imposition." So, insofar as state is sensitive to evidence, it cannot be an appearance state, regardless of any phenomenological or epistemological parallels it may have with genuine appearance states. Unlike an agent's desire for a third cup of coffee, an agent's visual illusion of unequal lines cannot be eliminated by reasoning. This disanalogy lend support to the claim that desires are beliefs. Overall, this is a very attractive account of how desires are sensitive to evidence. However, as I show below in my discussion of perceptualism, it does not appear to be the strongest overall account of how desires respond to evidence.

#### 4. *Perceptualism*

Perceptualism has become a standard formulation of the guise of the good thesis. Recall that the guise of the good says that a desire to  $\varphi$  represents  $\varphi$ -ing as good in some respect. Perceptualism further says that the way a desire represents value is analogous to the way perception represents the objects and properties of an agent's proximal environment (Hawkins 2008; Johnston 2001; Oddie 2005; Schafer 2013; Smithies & Weiss 2019; Stampe 1987). On this view, the evaluative content of a desire provides the desiring agent with a reason to  $\varphi$ . For example, when an agent desires to drink a cup of coffee, that prospect is presented as good by virtue of the delicious flavour of the coffee and its revitalising effects. Let us examine the two major points of analogy between desire and perception: first, the analogous phenomenology of each state and, second, the analogy between the epistemic function of each state.<sup>16</sup>

Phenomenologically, desires are akin to perception because they immediately present their content, both states have a rich phenomenal character, and instances of both states will purport to tell the agent about a way the world is (see Hawkins 2008, pp. 258-264; Johnston 2001a, pp. 205-213; Oddie 2005, pp. 47-80; 2009, pp. 132-134; 2015, pp. 71-74; 2017, pp. 32-37; 2018, p. 243; Schafer 2013, pp. 276-278; Smithies and Weiss 2019, pp. 38-40; Stampe 1987, pp. 356-357, pp. 361-362). For example, an agent who sees a coffee cup has a representation of a coffee cup immediately presented to them, the perception is phenomenally rich, and the agent will seem to be aware of a portion of her proximal environment. Analogously, an agent who desires to drink a cup of coffee will be immediately presented with a representation of the deliciousness of its flavour and its pleasantly revitalising effects, such content will be phenomenally rich, and desiring agent will seem to be aware of what it would be like to enjoy a cup of coffee, namely, delicious and pleasantly revitalising. Epistemically, desires and perception both provide epistemically basic justification for judgment (see Johnston 2001a, p.187ff.; Oddie 2005, pp. 47-80; Schafer 2013, p. 278; Smithies and Weiss 2019, pp. 37-40, 46-47; Stampe 1987, p. 342 ff.). When an agent sees a coffee cup before her, she is paradigmatically rationally entitled to non-inferentially judge that there is a coffee cup before her. An agent can tell that her judgment is justified just by reflecting on her experience of seeing the coffee cup. Plausibly, an agent's empirical knowledge is ultimately justified by such epistemically basic perceptual experiences. By analogy, when an agent desires to drink a cup of coffee, she is paradigmatically rationally entitled to non-inferentially judge that she has a reason to drink coffee. She can tell that she has a reason to drink coffee just by reflecting on her experience of wanting a cup of coffee. Plausibly, an agent's knowledge of her practical reasons ultimately bottoms out in her desire experiences. These phenomenological and epistemic analogies with perception make it plausible to think that desires are

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss perceptualism in terms of these two points of analogy in other work, including (McCormack, in press) and (McCormack, 2022).

a basic form of awareness of value just as perception is a basic form of awareness of our proximal environment.

Perceptualism is popular for many reasons. One major reason for its popularity is its ability to explain how desires are *insensitive* to evidence (see Hawkins 2008, pp. 249-250; Johnston 2001, pp. 213-214; Oddie 2005, chapters 3 & 8; 2015, p. 73; 2018, p. 242; Orsi 2015, p. 718; Schafer 2013, pp. 266-267; Stampe 1987, pp. 357-358, 376; Tenenbaum 2013, p. 5).<sup>17</sup> We normally expect beliefs to be directly and immediately revisable in light of new evidence, but we do not normally expect desires to be revised in a comparatively direct and immediate manner. Typically, if an agent believes that P, and is given strong evidence that  $\sim$ P, she can directly and immediately revise her initial belief. By contrast, we have much lower expectations about the revisability of desires. It often seems unreasonable to expect agents to directly and immediately change their desires in light of new evidence. Of course, we have recalcitrant beliefs. It certainly possible to have a belief that P persist despite an acceptance of the truth of  $\sim$ P. So, this contrast between belief and desire cannot be a difference of kind but rather of degree (see Hazlett 2021a, p. 70). Nevertheless, we intuitively hold starkly different expectations about the extent to which desires can be brought under the control of an agent's explicit, discursive reasoning. Desires are systematically and reliably *less sensitive* to evidence compared to beliefs. This suggests that DAB overestimates the evidence-sensitivity of desires. There is no obvious reason why, by the lights of DAB, we would not expect desires to be sensitive to evidence to *exactly* the same degree as other normative beliefs.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in ordinary contexts, it seems unreasonable to expect our desires to change in lockstep with our evidence, while beliefs that are not immediately responsive to evidence are *outliers*.<sup>19</sup> Perceptualism has a clear advantage on this score. *Perception* is clearly insensitive to evidence concerning corresponding beliefs. For example, I might know that a stick is straight yet see it as bent when it is half submerged in water. If desires represent goodness in a manner analogous to perception, we have a ready explanation of why desires are so frequently recalcitrant with respect to our beliefs about value. For example, I might want a third cup of coffee before noon even while believing that it will not be enjoyable and make me nauseated because that desire acquires its content *independently* of my evaluative beliefs.

While perceptualism has a ready explanation of how desires might be insensitive to evidence, it is not obvious that it has the resources to explain how desires could be sensitive to evidence. Gregory (2018, p. 1065; 2021, pp. 88-89) has argued that perceptualism “understates the rational responsiveness of desire” since it is plausible to suppose that experiential appearances are not at all responsive to evidence (Gregory 2017a, p. 214; 2018; 2021, pp. 87-93). For example, an agent might desire to drink a cup of coffee, then reflect on her belief that a third cup of coffee before noon would make her nauseated, then have her desire

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<sup>17</sup> Döring (2009) discusses a similar phenomenon of “conflict without contradiction” in the context of perceptualism about emotions. See also Helm (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Gregory (2021, p. 99) highlights the analogy between recalcitrant beliefs and desires. DAB can certainly tell a story here about the difference in degree between the two states. Gregory (2021, p. 23) notes that our normative beliefs are more prone to irrationality compared to non-normative beliefs and in (2021, chapter 5) Gregory discusses recalcitrance as a form of irrationality. This proneness to irrationality (and thereby recalcitrance) would be exacerbated when normative beliefs further involve a motivational disposition (as they do in the case of desires). This potential line of reply still predicts that that normative beliefs and desires should be sensitive to roughly the same degree. For my own part, I think this still overestimates the evidence-sensitivity of desires. Of course, Gregory could deny that desires and normative beliefs are not sensitive to evidence to the same degree due to the motivational disposition involved in a desire. But then this threatens to spoil Gregory's whole approach: we would need an independent story about how motivational dispositions are brought under rational control and explaining that feature was a major motivation for DAB in the first place.

<sup>19</sup> This is similar to the thought underlying Lewis (1988).



disappear. By analogy, I cannot experience the Müller-Lyer illusion, then reflect on the belief that the lines are of equal length, then have the illusion disappear. It is certainly not obvious how perceptualists could maintain the thesis that desires are a quasi-perceptual awareness of value in the face of this apparently sharp disanalogy. At least part of the problem is that it seems implausible to maintain that perceptual experiences are *based* on evidence. A visual experience of a red book on a brown table, for instance, is not itself grounded on some prior evidence-giving state. Rather, such an experience is a *basic* evidential state on which *other* types of mental states can be based. It would spoil the analogy between desire and perception to say that the value appearances in desires are directly based on evidence. So, perceptualists need to identify some plausible mechanism by which quasi-perceptual appearance states can be modified by the acquisition of evidence without thereby being directly based on beliefs about evidence.

Perceptualists are yet to provide a detailed and sustained account of such a mechanism. Nevertheless, some perceptualists have briefly pointed the way to a possible explanation of evidence-sensitivity. For instance, Graham Oddie (2005, p. 218) suggestively characterises desires as “theory-laden” and Johnston (2001, p. 209) gestures to an analogy with the perceptual phenomenon of “seeing-as.”<sup>20</sup> It is not immediately obvious how these proposals should be understood or how exactly they could be put to work in explaining evidence-sensitivity. Gregory anticipates a response along these lines from perceptualism. Gregory (2018, p. 1066; 2021, p. 89) entertains the idea that desires, considered as quasi-perceptual states, are somehow *cognitively penetrated* by an agent’s evaluative beliefs. According to Gregory (2018, p. 1066; 2021, p. 89) cognitive penetration is a “merely causal process” that is “rationally unconstrained.” Gregory has in mind the process by which visual perception can be modified by the acquisition of beliefs. Gregory (2018, p. 1066; 2021, p. 89) suggests that

you might make nearby vines look more snake-like by telling me that there are snakes around, but you might achieve the very same effect by telling me that there are not snakes around: the mere mention of snakes might be enough to put me on edge.

The idea is that if merely entertaining a proposition can modify the content of perception, regardless of its connection to one’s wider set of beliefs, it looks as if it simply bypasses any rational process. Yet, as Gregory (2018, p. 1066; 2021, p. 89) is right to point out, this is not a plausible model for explaining the way our desires, especially our instrumental desires, are sensitive to evidence and deliberation. Suppose I want to enjoy a delicious beverage and decide that a drinking coffee would be a good way of satisfying that original desire. Suppose further that I remember that I just brushed my teeth, recognise that the lingering mint taste would ruin the flavour of the coffee, and so lose my instrumental desire for a coffee. It seems implausible to try to explain this process of revising one’s instrumental desires in terms of a rationally unconstrained, merely causal process that was initiated by remembering that one had just brushed their teeth. For example, the agent who revised her desire would not experience the loss of her desire as something that “just happened” to her and she could, given suitable prompts, articulate the reasons that spoke in favour of revising her desires as she did.

Let us take a birds-eye-view of the dialectic. Gregory has set up the dialectic such that perceptualists only have two options: either claim that desires are directly based on evidence or claim that desires are modified by a rationally unconstrained, merely causal process of cognitive penetration. The first option would spoil the perceptual analogy. Desires would no longer be a basic form of awareness of value but

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<sup>20</sup> Tenenbaum (2007, pp. 39-40) claims that desires are appearances of value in a sense that encompasses intellectual appearances and other evidence-sensitive states. For example, Tenenbaum (2007, p. 39) explains that desires are appearances in a similar sense in which one can say “[l]ooking only at the evidence you gathered, it appears that she is not guilty.” Tenenbaum’s position arguably involves a denial of perceptualism (as it has been defined here) but represents another strategy of addressing Gregory’s arguments without thereby endorsing DAB.

would rather depend for their evaluative content on prior representational states, just as normative beliefs do. The second option, as we have seen, does not have the resources to plausibly explain how desires are within the scope of rational control at all. Happily, perceptualists have more options. In what follows I will sketch a middle ground position in which shows how desires could depend on prior representational states in a manner that is non-inferential while also rationally constrained.

I propose that agents have indirect rational control over their desires, considered as quasi-perceptual appearances of value, *via* modifications to the representational basis for a desire.<sup>21</sup> It is widely acknowledged that, in some sense, desires depend on prior representational states such as beliefs, perceptions, and imaginings.<sup>22</sup> There is a counter-factual dependence between desires and those prior states: if an agent did not have any inkling of what P is like, she could not have P as the intelligible object of her desire. In other words, an agent can intelligibly desire to  $\varphi$  only if that agent has some inkling of what it is to  $\varphi$ . For example, I can only intelligibly desire coffee for its delicious flavour if I have some inkling of what coffee is and what it tastes like. If I had utterly no conception of what coffee is or any of its attributes, it is unclear whether I could have a desire for coffee at all. So, at the very least, the paradigm case of a desire, one that is intelligibly related to other elements of one's psychology, will depend in some way on a prior set of representational states. The guise of the good thesis provides a neat explanation of this counterfactual dependence between desires and prior representational states. On this view, an agent needs a set of representational states that specify the non-evaluative features of  $\varphi$ -ing which then places the agent in the epistemic position to recognise the evaluative features of  $\varphi$ -ing.<sup>23</sup> This is a natural commitment to adopt if one already accepts the guise of the good thesis.

Let us specify the nature of the dependence between desires and their representational bases.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that the content of a desire is not already "contained" within the representational base. Rather, the desire is itself an original source of evaluative content. This explains a key commitment of perceptualism, namely, that desires provide epistemically basic inputs into our evaluative knowledge, just perception provides basic, non-derivative inputs into our empirical knowledge. Nevertheless, the representational basis for a desire must provide enough non-evaluative information about  $\varphi$ -ing to place the desiring agent in the position to recognise the value of  $\varphi$ -ing. So, the elements of a representational base for a desire must concern the object of desire, however, it does not need to directly provide the content of

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<sup>21</sup> For a similar strategy for controlling the content of desires, see Tooming (2018; 2021). According to Tooming (2018, pp. 955-956; 2021, p. 6) the content of desires is imagined. Such content can be imagined in such a way to strengthen or weaken the desire (Tooming 2018, pp. 955-956). On my account, desires can be sensitive to evidence provided by a range of representational states and, even in the case of imaginings, the modification of the content of desire is indirect. Representational bases can completely transform the content of desires rather than merely modifying their strength (see Tooming 2018). On my view, imaginings change the cognitive context within which agents discriminate the value of the object of desire. This more indirect mechanism for altering the content of desire has a major advantage over Tooming's account: it can explain why desires can be reliably *insensitive* to the contents of our imaginings. While Tooming makes an evidence-sensitive state a *part* of desires, I make evidence-sensitive states part of the *background conditions* for the determination of the content of desire. My account more easily explains the apparent independence of desires from our background evaluative beliefs.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of representational bases is similar to, but broader than, the notion of cognitive bases in Deonna & Teroni (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Here I am working with the simplification that the representational basis for a desire specifies the non-evaluative features of  $\varphi$ -ing. Of course, it could also represent *simpler* evaluative properties of  $\varphi$ -ing which then puts the agent in the epistemic position to recognise *more complex* evaluative properties of  $\varphi$ -ing in her desire.

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for identifying the need for greater clarity on this point.

the desire. For example, suppose an agent is on a diet which allows for one indulgent meal a week in which any food of any quantity can be consumed. Suppose that for this week's indulgent meal she wants an extra-large serve of nachos. Of course, she believes that eating such a large serve of nachos involves consuming a quantity of calories surplus to her bodily requirements. This feature of the meal contributes to one of its good-making features: it makes it an "indulgent" meal that makes the most of her "cheat" meal. However, the content of her desire does not represent the surplus calorie content of the meal. Rather, her desire represents the meal as delicious and indulgent. The content of her desire does not simply reproduce the content of its prior representational basis, even though the evaluative content of that desire is intelligible only in light of the possession of that belief. After all, she would be wrong to desire the meal for its indulgent character (in the relevant sense) if it turned out to have no calorie content at all.

We can characterise the way desires depend on prior representational bases by saying that the latter provides the *cognitive framing* for the former. Cognitive framing influences what evaluative properties an agent can discern. Suppose that an agent imaginatively entertains the prospect of performing an action, say, drinking a cup of coffee. Ordinarily, she will entertain the prospect in terms of habitual patterns of imagining: she will imagine the coffee in terms of the flavour and temperature of her usual brewing methods, she will imagine the effects of drinking coffee in terms of her disposition to enjoy such a flavour and her level of sensitivity to the caffeine such a beverage contains. This representational basis will "frame" the evaluative properties an agent can discern out of the entertained prospect. She will be inclined to recognise the hedonic value of the pleasure caused by tasting the coffee, the pleasant and useful mood-lifting effects of caffeine, and so on. But suppose she remembers that she had just brushed her teeth. This new piece of evidence re-frames the prospect. While she can still enjoy the revitalising effects of caffeine, she can recognise that the combination of the flavours of mint and coffee will have repulsive results. So, her desire is liable to disappear.<sup>25</sup> Changes in the cognitive framing of a prospect influence how the agent views the non-evaluative features of P, which in turn influences the evaluative features that are recognisable by the agent. Consequently, the imagined prospect no longer presents itself as good. This shows that there are principled and plausible ways of holding that the evaluative content of desire could be indirectly susceptible to rational control while still being independent of evaluative beliefs. The evaluative content of desire can be brought into the scope of rational influence *via* its dependence on a prior representational base.

My proposal can be clarified by examining a case of sensory perception which is both dependent on a prior representational base and sensitive to evidence. It seems relatively uncontroversial to maintain that complex property perception (perceptual content representing complex properties such as kinds, artifacts, occluded parts of objects, etc.) depends on prior representational states. While the existence and scope of complex property perception is not without controversy, it is widely accepted, and the idea is fairly intuitive. I will take for granted that complex property perception occurs simply for the expository purpose of showing how desires might be analogous to perception even though they depend on other states. Suppose you have two people – Giulia and Valentina – in an area of eucalypt forest that is populated by only one species of eucalypt tree. Saplings of this eucalypt species have circular leaves. Mature trees of this species have long, trailing tear-drop shaped leaves. This is a somewhat unusual feature of eucalypts: most other tree species have basically the same shape of leaf throughout their lifecycle. Giulia has lived in an environment where she has not encountered exceptions to the general rule that juvenile tree leaves strongly resemble the leaves of mature trees. Valentina is familiar with the two distinct leaf stages of eucalypts. Giulia, when surveying the area of forest, sees the sapling eucalypts *as a different type of tree* from the mature instances of that species. By contrast, Valentina sees the area as populated by *one species of tree*. As it turns

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<sup>25</sup> However, it is psychologically possible for her desire for coffee to remain despite the change in her beliefs and the relevant representational basis – I explain how these could be independent in more detail below.

out, Valentina brought Giulia to this area of forest expressly to show her how the leaves of this particular eucalypt differ throughout its lifecycle. After Valentina explains the lifecycle of this species of eucalypt, Giulia's perspective shifts and she comes to see the round-leaved eucalypts as juvenile versions of the larger, tear-drop leaved trees. This illustrates how ordinary perceptual experience is plausibly construed as (under certain circumstances, at least) counterfactually dependent on prior representational states. The representational states concerning the nature of trees make a causal difference to the content of each character's perceptual experience. So, my proposal is *prima facie* compatible with the perceptual analogy.

This proposal is a way of developing extant appeals to the "theory-laden" character of desires, or that desires involve a kind of "seeing-as." It has the advantage of explaining both synchronic and diachronic evidence-sensitivity. For example, a vegan might desire to eat some marshmallows, learn that they contain gelatine, then recognise the food as an animal product, then at the very moment they acquire this new evidence become repulsed by the prospect of eating marshmallows. This view also explains diachronic evidence-sensitivity. Suppose an agent has a set of beliefs and imaginative habits concerning coffee. She believes coffee to be delicious, revitalising, and has a strongly engrained habit of imaginatively attending to the characteristic taste of coffee and the effects of caffeine when entertaining the prospect of a cup of coffee. Such a strongly engrained set of cognitive habits explains why the agent's desire is reliably sensitive to her evidence that coffee would be delicious and revitalising. It also explains cases of recalcitrance. Her strongly engrained habit of imaging the prospect of drinking coffee in certain ways will reliably produce a desire for the taste and revitalising effects of coffee even when the agent believes that, say, drinking a coffee now would only make her nauseated and jittery. Further, the appeal to representational bases explains how desires might be irrational.<sup>26</sup> Desires would not be considered by themselves irrational, however, they could be irrational in the sense of failing to cohere with other relevant elements of an agent's psychology or by contributing to a defective passage of reasoning.

This general strategy is attractive but in very important ways incomplete. We now have the idea, already implicit in the perceptualist position, *that* prior representational states interact with and modify the content of desires. We also need to explain *how* the former modifies the latter in a way that elucidates the phenomena of evidence-sensitivity and evidence-insensitivity. The key to explaining this is to be found in the process of the production of desires.<sup>27</sup> Here, I will indicate one plausible way that perceptualists could model this process to elucidate the dynamics of evidence-sensitivity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For discussion of how DAB explains the irrationality of some desires, see Gregory (2018, pp. 1066-1068; 2021, chapter 5).

<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous referee who highlighted this need and suggested a solution in terms of the mechanisms which produce desires. As the reviewer pointed out, there are already several well-worked out accounts of possible mechanisms for the production of desires that are compatible with perceptualism, see especially Stampe (1987), Schroeder (2004), and Shaw (2021). Stampe (1987) argues that desires are produced through inner perceptions of need, Schroeder (2004) argues that desires are produced by the reward system, and Shaw (2021, p. 8) argues that desires are produced by a "competence to recognise, and respond to, (a subset of) one's normative reasons for action." I defend and motivate my own proposal in more detail in (McCormack 2022). The important point is that perceptualists have a wealth of plausible accounts to draw on to explain how the mechanisms that produce desires might be independent of an agent's beliefs.

<sup>28</sup> Another possible route would be to follow Tenenbaum (2007) and Brewer (2009), who argue that desires are expressions of an agent's evaluative outlook. For my own part, I worry that such an approach cannot secure the epistemological payoffs of perceptualism because it does not offer the same level of independence between desires and evaluative beliefs as my proposal does.

On my own view, desires are produced and regulated by an agent's capacity to affectively discriminate value.<sup>29</sup> On this view, representational bases constitute the "field" out of which value is discriminated. The idea that desires result from exercises of a capacity to discriminate value is analogous to the capacist view that perceptual experience is the result of exercises of capacities to discriminate empirical objects and their properties. The capacity to discriminate value is individuated by its role in the production of a distinctive kind of immediate evaluative knowledge.<sup>30</sup> This capacity can be exercised in a variety of different ways and such ways of exercising this capacity may be simpler or more basic compared to other exercises. An exercise of a capacity to discriminate value can be successful or unsuccessful. When an agent successfully exercises her capacity to affectively discriminate value, she succeeds in recognising how certain patterns or collections of non-evaluative properties within the representational base of a desire would amount to a certain value.<sup>31</sup> For example, an agent might have a representational base specifying the flavour, warm, and revitalising effects of coffee. An agent's capacity to discriminate value, when successfully exercised on such a representational base, will identify the values that are constituted by those non-evaluative features. The important point for our purposes is that the two can come apart. For example, suppose an agent remembers that she brushed her teeth and judges that the taste of coffee combined with mint would be repulsive. She might nevertheless continue to desire to drink coffee for its delicious flavour because the exercises of her affective capacity to discriminate value fail to identify how a collection of non-evaluative properties – mint flavour and coffee flavour – constitute a repulsive taste. The independence between exercises of a capacity to discriminate value and one's evaluative beliefs ultimately explains the possibility of recalcitrant desires. Although the two are essentially independent, they do often interact, which in turn explains how desires can be brought within the scope of rational control.

I have explained how desires can be brought into the scope of rational control like this. The acquisition of new evidence, barring irrationality, will modify the representational basis for a desire. Such modification consists in changing the way the total set of non-evaluative properties of  $\varphi$ -ing are represented. In short, the "cognitive frame" changes. This changes which evaluative properties can be identified within that set of non-evaluative properties *via* the exercise of the agent's affective capacity to discriminate value. Now I need to explain how desires can be *insensitive* to evidence. Moreover, this explanation should be consistent with the observation that some types of desires, such as those associated with bodily appetites and pleasure, are more prone to recalcitrance than other desires.

Insensitivity to evidence in desires can be explained by holding that the exercise of a capacity to discriminate value can operate *independently* of our beliefs. This independence means that exercises of this capacity can result in desires that conflict with or ignore the contents of our beliefs. There are at least three ways in which a capacity to discriminate value can be independent of beliefs. First, an exercise of a capacity to discriminate value can be successfully exercised *despite* the content of the agent's beliefs.<sup>32</sup> Second, a capacity to discriminate value might be *more sensitive* to certain values than how we weigh those values in our beliefs. A capacity to discriminate value might have *basic ways of being exercised* that – due to our neurological architecture – will have a *low threshold* for activation and so relatively frequently result in illusions of value

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<sup>29</sup> I also discuss the notion of a capacity to discriminate value in (McCormack, 2022). As noted above, this account has been influenced by the capacist accounts of perceptual experience provided by Susanna Schellenberg (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b) and John McDowell (2011; 2013).

<sup>30</sup> This is analogous to McDowell's conception of perception as a capacity for knowledge (see McDowell 2011).

<sup>31</sup> As I discuss in McCormack (2022, p. 16 footnote 6), this general approach is one way of developing the suggestion made in Johnston (2001, 211-212) that desires are based on imaginings.

<sup>32</sup> This has been dubbed "inverse akrasia" by Arpaly and Schroeder (1999), see also Arpaly (2003; 2015, pp. 9-11, 75ff.).

or issue in a distorted overall view of the value of the object of desire. These basic ways of exercising a capacity to discriminate value are plausibly tied to certain values. For example, hedonic values are a good candidate for a value that is closely tied to basic exercises of the capacity to discriminate value. By and large, we more readily, easily, and reliably identify hedonic values over more complex moral values.<sup>33</sup> Third, a capacity to discriminate value might be “tricked” into apparently discriminating value when certain collections of representations of non-evaluative properties are bundled together in a representational base. Certain patterns or collections of non-evaluative properties might not actually amount to a certain value but so strongly resemble a pattern or collection of non-evaluative properties that *do* amount to a certain value that one’s capacity to discriminate value is led astray and activated unnecessarily. Again, this way in which the capacity to discriminate value is independent of one’s beliefs might be traceable to more primitive neurological structures. The capacist approach provides perceptualism with the added benefit of explaining the irrationality of desires: a desire can be irrational considered as a response to certain objects because an agent’s capacity to discriminate value has misfired.

Perceptual experience exhibits three analogous forms of independence from empirical belief. First, perception can succeed in identifying the nature of an empirical object despite an agent’s beliefs. For example, suppose an agent looks at a diagram that is superficially similar to the Müller-Lyer illusion. However, the lines are indeed different lengths. The agent succeeds in discriminating the difference in length between the two lines despite falsely telling herself that they are the same length. Second, an agent’s perceptual experience might be more sensitive to certain features of their proximal environment than others. For example, the pitch of a baby’s cry will be phenomenologically much more salient than any other sound in the environment of the same decibel level. Third, an agent’s perceptual capacities can be “tricked” into apparently discriminating objects and properties due to the arrangement of simple parts of the relevant portion of the environment. Consider again the Müller-Lyer illusion. The arrow ends of the lines in the diagram are deliberately arranged to “trick” an agent’s capacity to distinguish lengths. These points of analogy between perception and desire show that a capacity-based account of desire fits naturally with perceptualism and that perceptualism can maintain that desires are sensitive to evidence in the same basic way as perception.

Let us now take stock of the dialectical position of perceptualism *vis-à-vis* DAB. Perceptualism provides a superior explanation of the ways that desires are both sensitive and insensitive to evidence concerning the desirability of the object of desire. Desires are sensitive to evidence indirectly through modifications of the representational basis for desires. A change in belief produces a change in the representational basis for desire which, in turn, changes the way in which an agent’s affective capacity to discriminate value is exercised, thereby changing the content of the resultant desire. Moreover, this captures the right *degree* of sensitivity: desires are within the scope of rational control, however, they do not move in lock step with our beliefs about evidence. Perceptualism also better explains how desires are *insensitive* to evidence. The perceptualist does not need to characterise an agent with a recalcitrant desire as someone who *also* has defective beliefs. A desire could be insensitive to evidence if the acquisition of new evidence either fails to appropriately modify the representational basis for a desire *or* if an agent’s affective capacity to discriminate value is defectively exercised (even if the representational basis is faultless). Certain kinds of desires (e.g. desires for bodily pleasures) are systematically more likely to be recalcitrant because there is a lower threshold for the activation of certain ways of exercising a capacity to discriminate hedonic value. Perceptualism also explains the irrationality of desire: a desire may not be fitting to its object because an

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<sup>33</sup> We can put these claims in a broader story about how some values are more fundamental to evolutionary success than others, if we wish to explain why our neurological architecture has been set up in this way. For my purposes, that is a philosophical project I can leave undeveloped here.

agent's capacity to discriminate value has misfired or her desire fails to cohere with the rest of her psychology.

## 5. Conclusion

Alex Gregory's (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2021) account of desire-as-belief (DAB) provides an elegant explanation of the rational intelligibility of desire-based actions and how desires could be brought within the scope of rational control. Its main rival, perceptualism, explains rational intelligibility by appealing to broadly similar conceptual resources. Gregory argues that we should favour DAB because, compared to perceptualism, DAB better explains how desires are sensitive to evidence. Here, I have argued for the opposite conclusion. DAB overestimates the degree to which desires are sensitive to evidence and understates the evidence-sensitivity of appearances of value. Perceptualism can explain how appearances of value are subject to *some* kinds of rational control, while doing justice to the intuitive view that beliefs and desires have systematically and reliably *different* degrees of evidence sensitivity. Reflection on the evidence-sensitivity of desires favours perceptualism, after all.

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