

Brady, Michael. *Emotional Insight: The Epistemic Role of Emotional Experience*.
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Michael Brady's *Emotional Insight* takes off from the commonsensical thought that emotions often help us to learn about value. The aim is to explain what exactly the epistemic contributions of emotions are and how they're able to make them. Many philosophers argue emotions are similar to ordinary perceptions: emotions justify evaluative beliefs in the way perceptual experiences justify empirical beliefs (*perceptualism*, I'll call it). While Brady takes perceptualism seriously, he argues that it ultimately cannot explain the epistemic value of emotion. His positive view emerges from the critique.

Perceptualism merits serious attention. There has traditionally been a divide in the emotions literature amongst theorists who take experiences of bodily states ("edgy" sensations, churning stomachs, etc.) to be central to emotions and those who take the intentionality, or aboutness, of emotions to be central. But in recent years many theorists on both sides of the fence find themselves attracted to the psychological view that many emotions are perceptual, or perceptual-like, experiences which represent value. (Such a view is arguably defended by Aristotle, amongst other historical figures. Contemporary defenders include Sabine Döring, Jesse Prinz, Robert Roberts, Christine Tappolet, and many others.) Brady, as far as I can tell, has no qualms with this psychological view. His aim is rather to show that we shouldn't allow it to lead us to a certain normative conclusion: perceptualism. But it has to be admitted the transition from the psychological idea that emotions represent value in perceptual-like ways to the idea that emotions are epistemically similar to perceptual experiences *is* tempting. And it's easy to get excited about perceptualism, too, since it looks like a view capable of helping with difficult questions in moral epistemology. *Emotional insight* includes a number of original and important arguments for why perceptualism – a tempting and important view – fails. It also reveals a large and underappreciated "gap" between a plausible psychological idea about emotions and the normative idea that often comes in its wake.

I conceive of *Emotional Insight* as dividing into three parts. The aim of the first (Chapters 1 and 2) is to present some ways emotions appear epistemically valuable and then to spell-out why a certain version of perceptualism seems best positioned to explain why emotions indeed are valuable in those ways. But then come a series of arguments for why perceptualism fails (Chapters 3 and 4). The positive view about the epistemic value of emotions emerges from this critique (Chapters 4 and 5). I'll say a bit about each part, though I can hardly discuss everything of interest.

Reflection on experience suggests emotions are epistemically valuable along several dimensions (10 – 16). First, emotions frequently help us to quickly and efficiently detect important objects that would otherwise have escaped notice. Second, some emotions provide *reasons* for evaluative beliefs insofar

as they involve *appraisals* of their object as valuable in some specific way, e.g., fear seems to appraise its object as dangerous, anger as insulting, and so on. (It's questionable whether concepts such as danger, insult, etc. really have evaluative content, but Brady assumes – as do most in the relevant literature – that they do.) Third, emotions promote evaluative *understanding*, since they persistently focus attention on the emotional object, which tends to result in ethical reflection on it (and perhaps also on one's own character, too). He takes it to be a burden of a theory of emotions to explain how emotions are valuable in these ways.

Brady considers a number of historically popular theories about what the “appraisal” element in emotional experiences is, e.g., desire, belief, and thought, but concludes that each fails to explain how emotions could be epistemically valuable in the relevant ways. (He also criticizes those who would deny there's any appraisal element in emotional experience.) The problems for various theories (and Brady mentions more problems than just difficulty with the epistemological *desiderata*) of emotion point toward a perceptual model. A handful of similarities between emotion and perceptual experience are outlined at the start of Chapter 2. Just as there is something it's like to have a perceptual experience, there is something it's like to have an emotional response (47). Both emotions and perceptual experiences also tend to be passive, or non-voluntary (47). They both represent the world as being a certain way, and the way they represent the world can diverge from our beliefs (48). These similarities, along with the problems for alternative views, suggest a psychological picture on which emotions are perceptual, or perceptual-like, experiences. Perceptualists are those who add the thesis that emotions supply immediate, perceptual-like justification for evaluative beliefs. This package of views appears well-positioned to vindicate at least two of the epistemic claims about emotions, namely that they help us to detect value and justify evaluative beliefs.

There are different versions of perceptualism, however, and we want to know which is best (45 – 82). Brady takes as central the distinction between *literal* and *non-literal* versions. This is a natural distinction to make. We often use perception-talk non-literally, after all, e.g., a logic student who claims to have “perceived” the invalidity of a proof. We're told that if non-literal views are preferable, then “this suggests that there is merely an analogy between emotional and perceptual experience at the epistemic level” (52). If emotions are literally perceptual, they need to satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for perceptual experience, whatever exactly those are. Brady's thought is that emotions can only literally be perceptual if they reside in a “dedicated input system.” He adopts Jesse Prinz's account of what this means. Prinz says, “Vision, audition, and olfaction are dedicated input systems. They each have their own neural pathways and proprietary representations. If emotions are literally perceptual, they must reside in such a system” (Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 222). Non-literal models deny emotions reside in such a system. Whether emotions are literally perceptual,

Brady tells us, “turns on the question of whether it is the feeling or affective element in emotional experience that plays the representational role; of whether, that is, our feelings are *the way in which* evaluative information is presented or disclosed to us.” (52; Brady’s emphasis). This is because there is a dedicated system for affect/feeling (54). He ultimately favors non-literal views.

I find this taxonomical strategy confusing. Why is such an input system essential for genuine perceptual experience? (No argument is given.) More importantly, though, we’re offered only vague motivation for why we need to care about whether emotions are literally perceptual. Perhaps some features essential to perceptual experience aren’t essential to its epistemic import such that even if emotions aren’t literally perceptual they still share the epistemically significant features of perceptual experience. And this isn’t merely an abstract point. Input systems, so defined, are arguably not an epistemically significant feature of ordinary perceptual experience. Given an aim of understanding the epistemic import of emotions, a better question to rely on for taxonomizing views (and fortunately this question does get treatment; see 69 – 82) would simply be: which epistemically significant features of ordinary perceptual experience does a given version of perceptualism take emotions to share (and do they plausibly share those features)?

Let me explain a specific way the literal/non-literal distinction creates confusion. We’re told, “The question of whether we should prefer literal or non-literal versions of the perceptual models is the question of how similar the epistemological stories we tell will be” (63). But this seems doubtful. Consider Jesse Prinz’s *literalist* perceptualism. On this view, an emotion, E, represents a given value, V, (if indeed it does) because the processes that produce E are reliably triggered by V and have the function of tracking V. Emotions are perceptual experiences of bodily states but (some) emotions also represent values (55 – 56). But emotions don’t involve *presentations* of evaluative properties in the way visual experiences of, say, green objects involve presentations of greenness. This difference seems epistemically significant. Now imagine a view (along the lines of Robert Roberts’s) according to which emotions involve representations of evaluative properties in the emotional experience, but also according to which feelings aren’t essential to the presentation of value. This view counts as non-literal, but it’s plausibly better for telling an epistemological story like perception. Fortunately, the somewhat confusing taxonomy doesn’t create any special challenges for understanding later chapters.

I focus on two of Brady’s more prominent criticisms of perceptualism. The first is fairly simple, but original and potentially devastating (112 – 116). Perceptual experiences are epistemically significant primarily because they provide immediate (though defeasible) justification for believing their content. But, he argues, emotions cannot plausibly provide us with any such reasons for evaluative beliefs. To begin (although this first point isn’t essential to the argument), there are reasons for and against emotions, in contrast with perceptual experiences; emotions can be rational or irrational. (Brady uses “merited” and

“appropriate” as equivalent to “rational.”) We’re told next that reasons for believing the evaluative content of an emotional experience are also reasons for believing the emotional response rational, and vice-versa (*premise 1*). For example, that the bull has sharp horns is both a reason to believe fear is rational and a reason to believe the bull is dangerous (i.e., what would be the content of fearing the bull). Notice now that it’s intuitively implausible to think an emotion can justify itself (*premise 2*). I cannot justify *to any extent* the belief that fear is rational just by fearing. Given these two premises, it follows emotions never provide reasons for believing their evaluative content, since then we would have to think emotions provide reasons for themselves. (Brady does believe emotions are capable of serving as what he calls “proxy” reasons when we’re unaware of genuine reasons (129 – 133). This allows him to get sufficiently close to the commonsense idea that emotions can justify evaluative beliefs.)

Perceptualists *may* be able to dodge this objection. The problem emerges when the perceptualist takes emotional experiences of a given type (e.g., shame) to represent their objects as meriting such a response. (Brady probably agrees; see his restatement of the argument on 114.) Here’s an illustration. Suppose *dangerous* analyzes into *rational to fear* so that fear represents its object as rational to fear. If the perceptualist says fear immediately justifies us in believing its content, and if fear represents its object as rational to fear, then perceptualists get the unhappy result that fear provides justification for itself. But suppose we say fear represents its object as *a threat which needs-to-be-avoided*. (Cf. Robert Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* [New York: Cambridge, 2013], 47.) On this picture, the perceptualists needn’t think fear experiences provide immediate justification for believing fear a rational response. The important question, then, is whether perceptualists have *independent* reason to avoid characterizing emotional experiences of a given type as representing experiences of that type as rational. I suspect they do. Keeping with the example of fear, the idea that fear represents its object as rational to fear strikes me as phenomenologically implausible, especially when compared to alternatives. Of course, I can’t begin to make a serious argument for this here. Going forward, then, Brady’s objection makes pressing the question of how the perceptualist should construe emotions’ content.

His positive view emerges out of what he argues is perceptualism’s most significant shortcoming. We’re told, “Ultimately the perceptual model fails, I want to argue, because it misidentifies our epistemic goal with respect to emotional objects and events” (137). I’ll sketch the line of thought over the next two paragraphs. Defenders of the perceptualism commonly claim that it’s normally permissible to take our emotions at face-value, as with perceptual experience. But Brady contends this isn’t so. If I tell you I see a red car, it would be peculiar to demand further justification for believing there’s a red car (86). But if I feel guilty about my behavior at the party, I don’t normally conclude straightaway that I did something wrong (87). Rather, I’m normally motivated to search for reasons to confirm or disconfirm my emotional appraisal. And we’re normally right not to take emotions at face-value, because the goal of ethical

thought isn't simply knowledge but also *understanding*. (We're also not entitled, Brady thinks, because emotions generally only provide weak reasons, if they provide any reasons at all.)

To understand, in the relevant sense, is (roughly) to *know why*. Understanding is important for a couple of reasons (142 – 46). The road to virtue requires knowing not simply what is valuable but why. The benevolent person, for instance, doesn't just reliably detect benevolent courses of action but knows why certain courses of action are benevolent. Furthermore, Brady makes a compelling case that understanding allows for superior regulation of emotion. An agent who didn't act wrongly but feels guilty will be more likely to give up her guilt if she comes to understand, as opposed to merely know, the permissibility of her action. The central epistemic value of emotions is that they facilitate understanding. Brady argues (on phenomenological, psychological, neuroscientific, and philosophical grounds) that emotions have the "function" (i.e., it is something emotions do) of motivating re-appraisals of their own initial appraisal. He says, "[I]t our emotions themselves that *raise*, rather than silence, the justificatory question" (96). They do this by forcing us to focus attention on the emotional object.

This central line of thought poses a serious challenge to perceptualism, though the perceptualist may not be without recourse. Let me explain. For Brady, as I understand him, much of our evaluative inquiry depends on emotions insofar as emotions motivate such inquiry. But reflection on the accuracy of emotional experiences does not *epistemically* depend on other emotional experiences in the way reflection on the accuracy of perceptual experiences depends on other perceptual experiences (see 95 – 96; 98 – 101). A perceptualist may resist this point, arguing that emotions, in virtue of their perceptual-like character, constitute the appearances of value crucial for forming any justified belief about the values represented by emotions. This picture has the structure to avoid the problems some of Brady opponents run into. For example, it's consistent with the thought that we shouldn't unreflectively accept the veracity of any given emotional experience; it's just that the reflection won't be epistemically independent of emotional evaluative appearances as such. If the perceptualist can defend such a view – and obviously that's a *major* project – perceptualism would be a central component in her account of evaluative reflection and thereby her account of how we achieve evaluative *understanding*, the central aim of ethical thought (as Brady compellingly argues). So, even if many *actual* perceptualist misidentify the aim of ethical thought, nothing about perceptualism as such, at least as far as I can tell, forces the error. There is thus *some* hope that perceptualists will be able harmonize their view with Brady's attractive picture of how emotions facilitate evaluative reflection and understanding.

I'm unfortunately unable to discuss all the important parts of *Emotional Insight*. I've passed over important criticisms of perceptualism (e.g., a brief but interesting argument from the "indiscriminate" nature of many emotional responses) and important details of the positive view (e.g., the argument for why understanding is crucial to the virtuous regulation of emotional attention). What makes this book so

important and timely is its penetrating critique of a popular, attractive idea that emotions are *normatively* similar to perceptual experience in virtue of being *psychologically* similar to them. The rich and compelling positive picture emerging from the critique merits serious attention in its own right.

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