

# Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously

## 1 Introduction

This paper offers a qualified defense of a historically popular view that I call *sentimental perceptualism*. At a first pass, sentimental perceptualism is the view that our knowledge of what is good or bad, right or wrong is grounded in emotions just as our empirical knowledge is grounded in perception.<sup>1</sup> Recently, András Szigeti and Michael Brady have independently developed a new and important set of objections to this theory. The objections have a common structure: they begin by conceding that emotions have some important epistemic role to play, but then go on to argue that understanding how emotions play that role means that there must be some *alternative*, emotion-independent route to obtaining knowledge of what is good or bad, right or wrong (henceforth, *value*).<sup>2</sup> If there has to be such an emotion-independent route, then the perceptual analogy breaks down in a significant way; emotions would not be the final arbiter in the evaluative domain in the way that perceptual experiences are in the empirical.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I argue that the right ways for sentimental perceptualists to respond to each of these objections are revealed by thinking through how analogous objections applied to perception and the empirical domain would be answered.

Thus Szigeti's and Brady's objections should not persuade sentimental perceptualists to give up their view. However, my response shows that these objections put important constraints on what a form of the view has to be like in order to do exciting metaethical work. Sentimental perceptualists must go beyond the initial, minimal analogy with perception. They must, we might say, *take seriously* the analogy with perception.

## 2 Introducing Sentimental Perceptualism

Sentimental perceptualism is a historically popular view. This view, or something very much like it, has been defended by Aristotle, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftsbury, Frances Hutcheson, David Hume,

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<sup>1</sup> Other perceptualist theories are possible. To mention some alternatives, Graham Oddie (2005) defends a similar view but with *desires* playing the central epistemic role, and Michael Huemer (2006) has *intellectual* experiences taking center stage.

<sup>2</sup> Szigeti (2013) develops three such arguments and Brady (2013) adds two more.

<sup>3</sup> Readers who think that some empirical knowledge is had in a way that is epistemically independent of perception may substitute 'perceptual' for 'empirical' in the formulation of sentimental perceptualism.

John Stuart Mill, and Max Scheler.<sup>4</sup> Today the view is defended by John McDowell (1998), David Wiggins (1998), and Antti Kauppinen (2013), among others.<sup>5</sup> Sentimental perceptualists insist that emotions play a perceptual-like role in grounding our knowledge of value. The aim of the view is to *demystify* evaluative knowledge by analogizing emotions to perceptions, but it can only do this if emotions are the ultimate source of justification for our beliefs about value. At a minimum, what sentimental perceptualists claim is that all substantive evaluative knowledge is epistemically dependent on emotion just as all empirical knowledge is epistemically dependent on perception. (Most proponents go beyond the initial epistemic analogy with perception, drawing additional epistemic and psychological connections; but the thin, epistemic analogy is all that is required on my taxonomy to count as a sentimental perceptualist.)

I say “substantive” here since sentimental perceptualists may wish to allow that there is some non-substantive (conceptual or analytic) evaluative knowledge not ultimately grounded in emotion. For example, it’s arguably a non-substantive truth that two situations cannot differ evaluatively without differing non-evaluatively. To allow emotion-independent knowledge of non-substantive truths is in keeping with the perceptual analogy, so long as the sentimental perceptualist also denies that we know non-evaluative, non-substantive truths by way of perception. Limiting the theory to substantive knowledge may also help to side-step certain objections. For instance, Simon Blackburn (1988) argues that it’s puzzling how such a theory could ever make sense of our knowledge of the supervenience of evaluative properties on non-evaluative properties. But if such knowledge is non-substantive, sentimental perceptualists needn’t worry, for they can say that it’s acquired in whatever way it is we acquire non-evaluative, non-substantive knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Sentimental perceptualism has attracted philosophers for a number of reasons. Many proponents think the view is well-positioned to account for the apparently tight connection between evaluative judgment and motivation. If emotions are our basic source of data about value, then it’s no wonder we’re often motivated to act in accord with our evaluative judgments. Furthermore, it strikes many philosophers as evident from experience that people often base their evaluative judgments on

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these historical claims are contentious, and I won’t try to defend them here. See Cohon (2008) on Hume, Moss (2013) on Aristotle, and Sayre-McCord (2001) on Mill.

<sup>5</sup> Kauppinen prefers to talk of intuition rather than perception, but his view still counts as a brand of sentimental perceptualism on my taxonomy.

<sup>6</sup> Kauppinen (2013) is a sentimental perceptualist who denies that emotions supply us knowledge of conceptual evaluative truths. He points out that this can help explain why some intuitions about value seem not to be emotional in character.

emotional responses. And many psychologists agree (see Haidt 2012 and Greene 2013). Sentimental perceptualism, then, would vindicate (many of) those emotion-based judgments. But *why* do certain affective experiences justify evaluative beliefs? The natural move here – and this will be a very common theme throughout this paper – is to deepen the analogy with perception.

Sentimental perceptualists typically argue that certain affective experiences rationalize evaluative beliefs because those experiences are psychologically (and so not just epistemically) similar to perceptual experiences. Here is Hutcheson, an early sentimentalist:

That some actions have to men an *immediate goodness*; or, that by a *superior sense*, which I call a *moral one*, we *approve* the actions of others, and perceive them to be their perfection and dignity, and are determined to love the agent; a like perception we have in reflecting on such actions of our own, without any view of natural advantage from them. (1738/1991: 263)

It is increasingly popular to identify garden-variety emotions (in contrast with a special moral sense) as involving presentations of their objects as being valuable in some way. Here is Sabine Döring, discussing an agent's negative emotional response to a caretaker's harsh punishment of a toddler:

In experiencing indignation at the harsh punishment of the toddler, it seems to you that the punishment is in fact unjust: your occurrent emotional state puts forward your indignation's content as correct. This is in analogy to the content of a sense perception. In perceiving that the cat is on the mat, it seems to you that the cat is actually there. (2007: 377)

Similar theories are defended for desires. Here, for instance, is Graham Oddie:

When I desire that P, P has a certain magnetic appeal for me. It presents itself to me as something needing to be pursued, or promoted, or embraced. Now the good just is that which needs to be pursued, or promoted, or embraced. So my desire that P involves P's seeming good (seeming to be worth pursuing). So the desire that P looks as though it just is the experience of P as being good. (2005: 41)

The thought common to all of these philosophers is that just as a visual experiences can present, say, shape properties, certain affective experiences can present evaluative properties. If emotions (and/or desires, though I focus on emotions) involve presentations of value, then sentimental perceptualists can argue that there is an explanation for why certain affective experiences rationalize evaluative beliefs.

Just as perceptual experiences rationalize empirical beliefs in virtue of presenting reality as being some way, so too do certain of our emotional experiences.

The central value epistemological question is, *How do we acquire evaluative knowledge?* Many have thought sentimental perceptualism the right answer, and just to put my cards on the table, I agree. But my goal here is only to show how sentimental perceptualists can develop their theory to parry the aforementioned new class of rationalist objections, to which I now turn.

### 3 Trouble for Sentimental Perceptualism?

Sentimental perceptualists insist on a central epistemological role for emotions in value epistemology, but historically many philosophers have argued that emotions are of *no* epistemic value. Here, to illustrate, is a memorable passage from Seneca's 85<sup>th</sup> Epistle:

[I]t makes no difference how great the passion is; no matter what its size may be, it knows no obedience, and does not welcome advice. Just as no animal, whether wild or tamed and gentle, obeys reason, since nature made it deaf to advice; so the passions do not follow or listen, however slight they are. Tigers and lions never put off their wildness; they sometimes moderate it, and then, when you are least prepared, their softened fierceness is roused to madness. Vices are never genuinely tamed. Again, if reason prevails, the passions will not even get a start; but if they get under way against the will of reason, they will maintain themselves against the will of reason. For it is easier to stop them in the beginning than to control them when they gather force. This half-way ground is accordingly misleading and useless; it is to be regarded just as the declaration that we ought to be "moderately" insane, or "moderately" ill. Virtue alone possesses moderation; the evils that afflict the mind do not admit of moderation. You can more easily remove them than control them. (2011)

For Seneca, and many other Stoics, we should strive to rid ourselves of all ordinary emotions, for once such emotions get a start, reason cannot stand against them. Our ordinary emotions are always a source of evaluative confusion.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, contemporary rationalists typically concede that emotions play at least some important epistemic role(s).<sup>8</sup> One reason for the shift – though not the only one – is that the work of many psychologists and neuroscientists makes it apparent that we would struggle to detect much of

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<sup>7</sup> The claim that Stoics were against emotion requires qualification (Sorabji 2000). Seneca, for instance, thought that the wise could cultivate special emotions (or something like emotions) to replace the emotions of unenlightened folk.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, I'm not aware of any rationalist who still clings to the old Stoic idea that our ordinary emotions have no helpful role to play. For some examples of rationalists who describe in detail the roles that they believe emotions to play, see Peacock (2004) and Audi (2013).

what we think of as valuable without emotion (see Damasio 1994; Ellsworth 1994; LeDoux 1998; Frijda 2007). To note one well-known example, Damasio (1994) has found that frontal lobe damage impairing emotional processing leads to poor practical decision making, even while scores on intelligence tests remain the same. One might think that it would be at least a *small* victory for sentimental perceptualists if everyone must concede that emotions are in some way epistemically important. But András Szigeti and Michael Brady have independently developed provocative arguments that aim to show otherwise.

Whereas the Stoics have an uncompromising attitude toward the emotions – insisting that they have *no* value – Szigeti and Brady argue at length that emotions *do* have value; but they then try to show – in different ways – that the value emotions have helps us to understand why there has to be an alternative, emotion-independent route to evaluative knowledge. I call these *shrewd rationalist objections*, since they begin by making a sort of concession to sentimental perceptualism. Szigeti develops three shrewd rationalist objections and Brady adds two more.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I begin by explaining and critiquing the three from Szigeti. I then turn to the two from Brady.<sup>10</sup> The method of defending sentimental perceptualism will be the same in each case. I explain why analogous arguments can seem to apply to perception, but of course we don't want to deny that our empirical knowledge is ultimately dependent on perception. Understanding why the arguments don't work for perception illuminates the theses we would expect sentimental perceptualist to accept in order to avoid the apparent problems. The lesson, once again, is that sentimental perceptualism is plausible only if its proponents take the perceptual analogy seriously.<sup>11</sup>

## 4 Shrewd Rationalist Objections: Part 1

### 4.1 The argument from recalcitrance

Szigeti argues that emotions are *heuristics* for value. To say that emotions are heuristics is to say that they are mental shortcuts or rules of thumb. When we rely on a heuristic we substitute the target

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<sup>9</sup> Szigeti's target is the view that emotions are the foundation of our evaluative knowledge and he does not assume proponents of that view make any analogy with perceptual experience. But my argument is that Szigeti's opponents can respond by making the analogy and by developing it in the ways that I outline.

<sup>10</sup> Brady (2013) develops other objections to sentimental perceptualism. I'm only concerned here with so-called *shrewd rationalist objections*.

<sup>11</sup> I do not claim that sentimental perceptualists need to say that emotions are *literally* perceptual. There may still be important disanalogies. To get a sense for some of the ways in which emotions might be thought analogous to perceptions, see Salmela (2011).

attribute for the heuristic attribute.<sup>12</sup> This generally allows us to reason more quickly than we would otherwise be able; heuristics are frequently said to be “fast and frugal” (Gigerenzer et al. 1999). Relying on heuristics is often superior to non-heuristic based reasoning, though not always. For example, when we rely on the “availability heuristic,” we estimate the probability of something based on the examples that come readily to mind. Since plane crashes are commonly reported in the media, relying on the availability heuristic, rather than the statistics themselves, can lead us to a misguided picture of how dangerous air travel is (Szigeti 2013: 847).

Szigeti argues that there is a great deal of empirical evidence supporting the conclusion that emotions are a biological system subserving heuristic functions (2013: 848 – 53). I’ll review just a bit of that evidence here. Some supposedly comes from experimental psychology. Recent psychological research suggests that people rely on emotions directly in forming a variety of different kinds of judgments and decisions. For instance, if information does not trigger an emotional response, it is often treated as less significant in one’s deliberation. Recognizing that something raises the probability of getting cancer causes a significant emotional reaction for most people, whereas recognizing that something raises the probability of a car accident has a much smaller effect. This difference seems to impact our judgments about which hazards are riskiest and most in need of regulation (Slovic et al. 2002: 410). Another example is the “outrage heuristic” (Sunstein 2005: 538). When deciding how severe a wrongdoer’s punishment should be, we tend to use the degree of our outrage as the measure. Szigeti hypothesizes that psychological evidence for other emotional heuristics (e.g., a shame heuristic) could be discovered.

There is also supposed to be evolutionary evidence for the heuristics model. Emotions such as sadness, anger, disgust, and fear seem to have evolved to help with “fundamental life tasks” (Ekman 1992). Fear, for example, has evolved to help us respond quickly and effectively to danger. We often (though not always) take something to be dangerous, and behave accordingly because we’re afraid of it, which is often better for responding effectively than if we stopped to engage in rational reflection about whether the object of our fear really is dangerous. (By the time we answer that question, we may already be dead.) More generally, these emotions – often called “basic emotions” – are phylogenetically hard-wired response-mechanisms which respond quickly to environmental cues and, at least in familiar environments, obviate the need for slower, cognitive reflection. There is considerable

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<sup>12</sup> Szigeti borrows talk of substitution from Kahneman and Frederick (2002).

controversy about which emotions are hard-wired in this way; but there is a good deal of agreement that some are.<sup>13</sup>

Szigeti argues that there are several different ways to see why the fact that emotions are heuristics makes trouble for sentimental perceptualism. The first is *the argument from recalcitrance* (Szigeti 2013: 855 – 56). A recalcitrant emotion, as Szigeti understands it, is an emotion that persists even though it is judged unwarranted. For example, an agent may fear falling even though she acknowledges that there's no real chance she will fall, e.g., because she's securely fastened to a safety harness. The phenomena of recalcitrance is adequately accounted for by the heuristics model of emotions. Affect heuristics have evolved to respond to certain environmental cues; and they often don't cease responding to those cues even when we recognize the cue to be misleading. But then this looks like a problem for sentimental perceptualism. To use Szigeti's words, "If emotions can persist despite our best judgment that they are wholly unjustified in some cases, then it's hard to see on what grounds emotions should be stipulated to be the highest court of appeal in matters axiological" (2013: 856). Thus recalcitrance is supposed to be a problem for sentimental perceptualism, because in cases of recalcitrance we're apparently not relying on our emotions and, moreover, we seem (at least in many instances) justified in not doing so.

#### 4.2 Responding to the argument from recalcitrance

The argument from recalcitrance relies on two premises. The first is that there can be cases of recalcitrance. The second is that if there are cases of recalcitrance, then all evaluative beliefs are not epistemically dependent on emotion. But there is something odd about this conditional premise. Here, again, is how Szigeti puts it:

If emotions can persist despite our best judgment that they are wholly unjustified in some cases, then it is hard to see on what grounds emotions should be stipulated to be the highest court of appeal in matters axiological. (2013: 856)

A sentimental perceptualist ought to say that in whatever sense emotions can be unjustified, so too can perceptions. But notice how unpromising the conditional premise looks if we substitute "perceptions" for "emotions" and "empirical" for "axiological":

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<sup>13</sup> I take it Szigeti assumes that if the basic emotions are heuristics, then this somehow guarantees, or makes it probable, that non-basic emotions are, too. There's no need to speculate about the matter here.

If perceptions can persist despite our best judgment that they are wholly unjustified in some cases, then it is hard to see on what grounds perceptions should be stipulated to be the highest court of appeal in matters empirical.

But perceptions *are* the highest court of appeal in matters empirical. Perceptions seem to be the only basic source of knowledge about how the world contingently is (or nearly the only source, if we allow for special cases of the contingent a priori). Any judgment that a given perception is unjustified depends in some way on other perceptions.

One may complain that there is no sense in which perceptual experiences are ever unjustified. But it seems to me that sentimental perceptualists can reasonably maintain that perceptual experiences can be unjustified in the same ways as emotions. Szigeti seems to have two sorts of cases in mind. First, there are cases in which our emotional systems are working as they should, but they nonetheless misrepresent the world evaluatively.<sup>14</sup> A person's fear of falling while riding a roller coaster is in some sense incorrect (there is a negligible chance of crashing or the harness failing), but the fear system is still working as it should. This is arguably like the Müller-Lyer illusion. Our visual system is working as it should in representing one line as longer, but the two lines are in fact the same length. There are other cases, though, in which our emotional or perceptual systems are *not* working as they should. This *could* be a result of our own irrational choices or beliefs. For example, a person who unwisely cultivates a strong habit of watching movies or playing video games for lengthy periods may be sad when she cannot indulge in the activity for significant stretches of time; but, in this case, the emotion is not merely incorrect but also, we might say, *indirectly* unjustified due to the irrationality of her choices to cultivate her emotional tendencies in that way. An analogous case involving perception would be someone who has a variety of irrational beliefs about the paranormal and so develops both auditory tendencies to hear creaking noises as voices and visual tendencies to see distant planes as flying saucers. There are also cases in which our emotional or perceptual faculties aren't well-functioning yet we're not responsible for the defect.

In sum, the sentimental perceptualist's analogy with perception reveals how Szigeti's conditional premise – if emotions persist despite judgments that they're unjustified, then emotions must not be the highest court of appeal in matters axiological – can be resisted in a way that is natural for the theory. The very same phenomenon occurs with perception and empirical judgments (or so the

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<sup>14</sup> We might prefer to speak of correctness/incorrectness here.



sentimental perceptualist can reasonably maintain) and yet this is not grounds for denying that perception is the final court of appeal in the empirical domain.

One may worry that although I have responded to the letter of the argument, the intuitions behind it remain. The thought, perhaps, is that it *seems* as if we're relying on reason alone in cases of emotional recalcitrance. There are at least three theses that sentimental perceptualists will naturally accept – theses suggested to us by reflecting on perception – that help dissolve the intuition. Here is the first:

*Background Principle Override:* we often have emotion-backed background beliefs about what is valuable that we use to override how things appear evaluatively at a given time.

Imagine a person unwittingly strolling down a bike path. A biker who passes shouts at him to move to the walk path. The person becomes angry, but then immediately judges the anger to be incorrect on the basis of the following principle which he accepts: looking out for the safety of others is good. The belief in this principle is emotion-backed, even though it is not backed by any *occurrent* emotions. The agent's credence in the principle is quite high (e.g., because it's based on his beliefs about a wide range of cases) and so he judges his *occurrent* emotional experience to be misleading. In similar fashion, an agent who visually experiences a strawberry as purple may judge her perceptual experience somehow mistaken (it's not a real strawberry or it's not purple), since she has the background perception-backed belief that strawberries are red.<sup>15</sup>

The walker who experiences the misleading anger may also have a belief about the conditions under which his emotions are reliable. Here is a second thesis that is natural for sentimental perceptualists to accept:

*Background Conditions Override:* we often have background beliefs about when our emotions are likely to be reliable that we use to override how things appear evaluatively at a given time.

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<sup>15</sup> What does it mean for a principle to be supported by emotion or perception? The idea is that the principle is a *generalization* from past emotional/perceptual experiences: when we consistently experience some object (e.g., an act-type, a natural kind) as having some property, we often form the justified, general belief that objects of that sort possess the property in question (e.g., looking out for the safety of others is good, strawberries are red); and we often use those general beliefs to correct future experiences which suggest otherwise.

Just as we have beliefs about when our perceptual experiences are reliable, so too do we have beliefs about when our emotions are. When lighting conditions are poor, for instance, we know to be highly skeptical of our visual experiences. Or, if a person has just brushed her teeth, she knows to be skeptical of her ability to detect the flavors of food. Similarly, we know that there are conditions when our emotions are likely to mislead, e.g., when we're taking criticism or when we're intoxicated. There is an important question of *how* we know when our emotions are reliable. But since there is a similar question for perceptual experience, the sentimental perceptualist hypothesizes that we know in an analogous way.<sup>16</sup>

The sentimental perceptualist should emphasize that our emotion-backed beliefs in background principles or ideal conditions will often not be foregrounded in our thinking about whether an occurrent emotion is correct; and if we're not careful, this can mislead us into thinking that we're not relying on emotions to correct an emotion. To illustrate, take a scenario in which a person is afraid of a snake slithering near her feet. Her fear (let's suppose) represents the snake's potential bite as a threat to her welfare. However, she figures out that the emotion is misrepresenting once she realizes it's only a harmless corn snake. Foregrounded in her thinking about whether her fear is correct are certain *non-evaluative* facts, in particular that the snake has the visible marks of a corn snake and that corn snakes have a non-venomous, non-aggressive nature. She needn't rely on emotion to learn such information. That said, to rationally conclude that the snake is no threat to her welfare she also needs to have emotion-backed beliefs about the kinds of things that can detract from her welfare (e.g., pain), or so the sentimental perceptualist can for all we have said maintain.

Finally, there is a third thesis that illustrates how we might rationally set aside an occurrent emotional experience without appealing to pure evaluative reasoning:

*Testimonial Override:* we often trust others evaluatively more than ourselves, at least in certain kinds of situations.

Consider an example of a youth who has all too often come to recognize that his mother's judgments about his welfare are more accurate than his own. And so when he is deciding whether to do an act, or series of acts (e.g., drinking multiple beers), that his mother has advised against, he judges that he

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<sup>16</sup> One may wonder whether background conditions override is really distinct from background principle override, since presumably the sentimental perceptualist thinks our beliefs about when emotions are reliable is emotion-backed (just as it is with perception). What makes them distinct is that principles about ideal conditions make explicit reference to emotions and not (just) to values.

shouldn't do it. He does so on the basis of her testimony and despite the fact that the act affectively appears good. Examples of testimonial override are especially common in religious contexts. A person might trust a spiritual advisor or the authors of a religious text to know the evaluative truth. The existence of evaluative testimony is no more a threat to sentimental perceptualism than is empirical testimony to the idea that our empirical beliefs are epistemically dependent on perception. Just as empirical testimony is a route to empirical knowledge only if perception is, the sentimental perceptualist says that evaluative testimony is a route to evaluative knowledge only if emotion is.

So long as sentimental perceptualists take the perceptual analogy seriously, in the ways I have been suggesting, they can reasonably contend that recalcitrance is no more a problem for their theory than it is for the theory that empirical judgments ultimately depend on perception. Failing to keep the override theses in mind can mislead us into thinking that in cases of recalcitrance we rely on emotion-independent reason, or so the sentimental perceptualist maintains.

#### **4.3 The argument from collective action**

Next we have *the argument from collective action* (Szigeti 2013: 856 – 57). Szigeti uses guilt as his primary example. He says, “in many cases which involve harm due to the aggregation of actions by several people—think of environmental pollution, multinational corporations or intergovernmental organizations—contributors tend to experience no guilt feelings” (2013: 856). The heuristics model can explain this: guilt has evolved to help one respond to one's own actions in situations familiar to our ancestors. Paradigmatically, guilt responds to “a single action of visible impact and short duration by one agent causing harm to one or few victims” (2013: 857). As we diverge from paradigmatic cases, guilt responses tend to weaken, or even disappear. But behavior in the non-paradigmatic cases, e.g., the actions comprising the collective harms mentioned above, are often no less wrong. We cannot always rely on our guilt responses as a measure of the degree of wrongness of an action. We have to, and indeed often do, step back from those responses to consider matters rationally.

#### **4.4 Responding to the argument from collective action**

The first premise of the argument from collective action is that we often make reasonable judgments about the evaluative status of different actions despite never emotionally representing them as being that way. This often happens with collective action cases. Sentimental perceptualists should grant this premise. The trouble arises with the second, which says that if evaluative judgment comes

apart from emotional evaluative representation in the way just mentioned, then we aren't epistemically relying on emotions to make those judgments. In responding, the sentimental perceptualist should lean on the analogy. It's not the case that we can only know about an empirical property if there is a perceptual experience that accurately represents it. Many philosophers deny that we can perceive, say, the property of being a table, but no one should deny that we need perception to learn about the presence of tables. Or, to take some less controversial examples, we don't perceive protons or planet Earth (at least not until space travel), but we can learn about them using perception. There is a major outstanding question for philosophers of perception and sentimental perceptualists alike: what is the range of properties that can be experientially represented and how exactly do we know about the properties – empirical or evaluative – that aren't? Although we cannot take up such questions in any detail here, it will be useful to take the abstract point made in this paragraph – namely, that it's natural for the sentimental perceptualist to hold that the class of evaluative properties we emotionally represent is smaller than the class of evaluative properties we know about on the basis of emotion – and point to one concrete path forward.

Many philosophers and psychologists believe that emotions are principally about factors significant for the agent who experiences the emotion, often labeled *core-relational themes*.<sup>17</sup> (I'll assume these theorists are right, but other sentimental perceptualist might have different views about which properties get represented and so the story they tell will be slightly different.) Here is Richard Lazarus's eloquent description of the kind of value that emotions tend to be about:

An emotion is always about certain substantive features of the relationship between a person and an environment. Although this relationship can occur with the physical world, most emotions involve two people who are experiencing either a transient or stable interpersonal relationship of significance...

[R]elational meaning refers to the juxtaposition of two conditions, the goal that is at stake in the encounter and the action or inaction of the other person that bears on the fate of that goal. Both events must be united in terms of a meaning, which must be appraised by the person as either a relational harm, potential or actual, or a benefit to produce an emotion. This is what relational meaning is all about...

I have proposed that each emotion involved a special, and different relational meaning, which I referred to as core relational themes. For example, anger is the result of a demeaning offense against me and mine, anxiety is facing uncertain, existential threat, sadness is having experienced an irrevocable loss, pride is enhancement of one's

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ben-Ze'ev (2000); Martha Nussbaum (2001); Lazarus (2003); Prinz (2004). Nussbaum, however, allows that certain atypical emotions (e.g., wonder) represent impersonal value.

ego-identity by taking credit for a valued object or achievement, and relief is a change of a negative condition for the better. (2003: 126)

On this picture, emotions are for the most part about the welfare of the agent experiencing the emotion. But we can allow that some emotions are altruistic in the sense that they target the welfare of others. Our ability to engage in mind-reading and/or perspective taking may be what makes such altruistic responses possible.<sup>18</sup> It's natural for sentimental perceptualists to accept the following:

*Content Limits:* Emotions do not represent all types of values and are for the most part, albeit not exclusively, about what is significant for the agent experiencing the emotion.

Once this thesis is on board, not only do sentimental perceptualists have grounds for resisting a key premise in the collective action argument, but also have a way of speaking to the specific cases involving collective moral wrongs that Szigeti has in mind. Emotions are not directly about properties like moral wrongness, even though they play a role in helping us learn about such properties. Still, one may worry about how this learning takes place.

Sentimental perceptualism, recall, only says that *substantive* knowledge of value is grounded in emotion. But just as we can have conceptual knowledge of tables, protons, mountains, etc. not grounded in perception, so too can we have conceptual evaluative knowledge. We can learn about the existence of evaluative properties not represented in emotional experience by combining our knowledge of values directly represented, conceptual evaluative knowledge, and non-evaluative knowledge. Take the collective action case. Our emotions are arguably not suited for tracking an impersonal evaluative notion such as moral wrongness. However, suppose we accept Philippa Foot's (1958) idea that it is a conceptual truth that we have strong moral reasons to unselfishly promote human flourishing or welfare.<sup>19</sup> If we accept this, then we can see the rudiments of a story for how we could know that polluting is very wrong, even though it fails to generate a strong emotional response: we are in some way combining our emotion-based knowledge of welfare with our knowledge that morality demands unselfish promotion of welfare. It is important for sentimental perceptualists to eventually give a detailed story for how this combining works (it probably won't work by an inference transparent to the reasoner, for example), but those concerned with empirical knowledge will arguably face a similar question. For my purposes, it's enough to note that sentimental perceptualists naturally

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of various hypotheses about how altruism might emerge, see Nichols (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Foot's idea is also endorsed by Michael Smith (1994) and Terence Cuneo (2007).

take the class of evaluative properties we emotionally represent to be smaller than the class we know about on the basis of emotion; and moreover, it's reasonable to expect they will be able to tell a story about how we come to know about the properties not directly represented.

#### 4.5 The argument from difficult cases

Szigeti's third argument is *the argument from difficult cases* (2013: 858 – 59). Here he uses Sophie's Choice as his example. In this case, Sophie's Nazi captors force her to choose one of her two children to be saved, or else both will be killed. Sophie ends up selecting one of her children. After making the choice, Sophie may experience guilt. After all, she has made a decision that she knew would lead to the death of one of her children. On an intellectual level, she may judge that she acted rightly and is not to blame, but her emotions are not meant to deal with such "extreme and difficult cases" though the "affective heuristic nevertheless continues to function as an information channel" (2013: 858). The sentimental perceptualist may suggest that Sophie's emotion is more likely to be regret. But then this leads straight to a supposedly serious problem for sentimental perceptualism. It is often very hard for agents to tell which emotions they are feeling in difficult cases. But if we don't know what we are feeling, then "the emotional response cannot be used as evidence in the evaluation of the relevant situation because one could only rely on the emotional response if one knew how to classify the emotion" (2013: 858).

#### 4.6 Responding to the argument from difficult cases

The argument from difficult cases has the by now familiar two premise structure. The first says that it's often difficult to tell which emotions we're experiencing when we face puzzling evaluative situations, yet in those cases we often do come to determinate conclusions. I have no qualms here. The second is that if it is difficult to figure out our emotions in puzzling cases and yet we come to a determinate evaluative conclusion, then those judgments must not be supported by emotions.<sup>20</sup> There are a couple ways to resist this premise. First, it's worth noting that the three "override" theses mentioned above can help the sentimental perceptualist. Take Background Principle Override and Background Conditions Override. If we imagine Sophie trying to figure out whether she has done

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<sup>20</sup> Szigeti in fact only says that we would not be able to rely on the occurrent emotional response. But I take him to mean something stronger than this, namely that we would not be able to rely on emotions. Only the stronger claim makes trouble for sentimental perceptualism.

anything bad, she may not be able to make sense of which emotions she's experiencing – e.g., guilt, regret and/or sadness – but she may recognize that she's in less than an ideal situation for having accurate emotional responses and also that according to principles she accepts (e.g., that people aren't to blame for the bad situation they're in unless they knowingly behave in ways that are likely to cause the situation) she hasn't done anything to be ashamed of.

The second, and key, problem with the argument is this: it's actually a *good* result for sentimental perceptualism that difficult evaluative questions are more-or-less co-extensive with the cases in which it's difficult to figure out exactly how our emotions are presenting things. Suppose, to return to the perceptual analogy, you are looking through the fog at a large object in the distance. It may be difficult to sort out precisely what you are seeing. What color and shape is the object, exactly? Is that the fog moving or the object? And so on. With respect to some of these questions, your perceptual experiences may be presenting to you a certain answer (e.g., your experience is only presenting the fog as moving, not the object), though it difficult for you to interpret them correctly. In other cases, the experience may not present a determinate answer. Any judgments we make will be fallible, although they will nonetheless be grounded in perceptual experience. The defender of sentimental perceptualism should insist that matters are much the same in difficult ethical situations. We occasionally have trouble recognizing how our emotions present things or, as a matter of fact, our emotions don't present things determinately. (Nevertheless, the evaluative *belief* we form in such situations may be very determinate; and it may enjoy a high-degree of justification, e.g., if we rely on a well-supported background principle.) Difficult cases, then, are not obviously a problem for sentimental perceptualism, and they may even *help* the sentimental perceptualist's cause, given that the view seems to make accurate predictions about which cases will prove difficult.

#### **4.7 Final remarks on the idea that emotions are heuristics**

Szigeti's official objections do not slide directly from the purported fact that emotions are heuristics to the conclusion that at least some substantive evaluative knowledge is independent of emotion. But what should the sentimental perceptualist think of the claim that emotions are heuristics?

Sentimental perceptualists probably ought to reject the idea that emotions are by their nature heuristics, or allow that they are heuristics only in a highly qualified sense (see below), even if there are certain cases in which we might use them as heuristics. According to Szigeti's understanding of a

heuristic, we rely on a heuristic when we substitute the target attribute for the heuristic attribute. Szigeti's central example of an emotional heuristic is the outrage heuristic: we often answer the question of how severe punishment ought to be by answering the question of how outraged we are. But a sentimental perceptualist will resist the idea that, at least in normal cases, that there is any *substitution* going on here. Recall Döring's description of indignation (which is arguably the same emotion that Szigeti has in mind):

In experiencing indignation at the harsh punishment of the toddler, it seems to you that the punishment is in fact unjust: your occurrent emotional state puts forward your indignation's content as correct. This is in analogy to the content of a sense perception. In perceiving that the cat is on the mat, it seems to you that the cat is actually there. (2007: 377)

For Döring, indignation, or outrage, is the way in which we become aware of the target attribute; it represents it directly.<sup>21</sup> If we want to call outrage, at least in normal cases, a heuristic, then the sentimental perceptualist should insist that we ought to say the same about perception. We *could* treat perception as a heuristic – we answer the question of whether the cat is on the mat by answering the question of whether we see a cat on the mat – but this runs roughshod over an apparently important distinction between perception and typical heuristics, namely that perception, in contrast with the typical heuristic, is by its nature about the target attribute. But even if we want to think of perceptions and emotions as heuristics, there is no trouble, so long as we recognize that this fact alone has little epistemological upshot for how knowledge in some domain can be achieved.<sup>22</sup>

In arguing that it's misleading to say that emotions are heuristics, sentimental perceptualists aren't forced to deny any of Szigeti's scientific data points. The reasons are simple. None of the data points, as Szigeti himself notes, show that emotions are not perceptual-like experiences of value (2013: 850). But then if that is right, we have granted (or at least allowed) sentimental perceptualism's favored psychological framework, and so the only way that Szigeti can generate trouble for sentimental perceptualism is by making evaluative assumptions and/or assumptions about how sentimental perceptualism is to be developed. As a case in point, Szigeti has the following to say in his discussion of the evolutionary reasons to treat emotions as heuristics:

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<sup>21</sup> The point I make here is independent of whether we think Döring has gotten outrage's evaluative content correct.

<sup>22</sup> Szigeti (2013: 851) seems to treat perception as a heuristic, too.



But also these evolutionary accounts appear to converge with the heuristics-model as to what emotions cannot do for us. As phylogenetically hard-wired response-mechanisms, emotions are too rigid to track fine-grained evaluative features of situations which require us to make normative judgments or decisions. (2013: 851)

It seems to me that there are a lot of crucial assumptions here. Most obviously, there is an evaluative assumption about the fine-grainedness of the evaluative landscape. More subtly, though, there appears to be a background assumption about what a sentimental perceptualist theory has to be like, namely that it must say that the only values we can know about are ones directly tracked by emotion. But, as we have already seen, that is a commitment we would expect those sentimental perceptualists who take the perceptual analogy seriously to reject.

In sum, Szigeti's shrewd rationalist objections to sentimental perceptualism don't leave the sentimental perceptualist without recourse. By hewing close to the perceptual analogy, sentimental perceptualists can have a theory that is not only compatible with the cases Szigeti has in mind but also predicts them.

## 5 Shrewd Rationalist Objections: Part II

### 5.1 The argument from indiscriminacy

Using an alarm-bell metaphor to characterize at least some of our emotions is fairly common (see, for instance, Ben Ze'ev 2000 and Greene 2013). Typically, the metaphor is applied to so-called "affect program" emotions. This group of emotions includes anger, fear, sadness, disgust, joy, and surprise. Here is Brady's description of affect programs and affect program responses:

Affect programs are "relatively discrete special-purpose mechanisms that are sensitive to some important aspect of human life", and which evolved because they were of adaptive value with respect to various recurring and universal human situations. Affect program responses are short-term, reflexive, and phylogenetically ancient reactions to a limited class of perceptual inputs. On this line, fear is an automatic, reflexive response to potential danger, which results from an affect program which has evolved to deal with threats. (2013: 20 - 1)<sup>23</sup>

Affect-program responses are *indiscriminate*. That is, they tend to trigger on the basis of a narrow range of inputs, operating on a principle of "better safe than sorry." Emotions such as fear often emerge before there is good evidence that the emotion would be accurate to the situation; and this is by-and-

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<sup>23</sup> Brady quotes in the passage above from D'Arms and Jacobson (2003: 138).

large a good thing. Having certain emotions be highly sensitive, or indiscriminate, helps us to survive; the indiscriminacy of fear, say, can help us to avoid a predator we might not otherwise of avoided if our fear only triggered upon excellent evidence of a predator (Ellsworth 1994).

But Brady insists that it's not just affect program responses that are indiscriminate. Emotions such as guilt, resentment, pride, and shame also tend to be responses to a narrow range of environmental inputs, or so it would appear. (In other words, the sets of inputs sufficient to generate the emotion, at least in many cases, do not make it *highly* likely that evaluative content of the emotion is accurate.) Like affect programs responses, this second group of emotions has a pervasive influence on our behavior; but unlike affect program responses, they aren't so much hardwired as they are the product of our social and cultural surroundings.

Now we are in a position to identify a fourth shrewd rationalist objection to sentimental perceptualism, *the argument from indiscriminacy*. If our emotions are indiscriminate, then we need a more discriminating evaluative system to determine whether our indiscriminate emotional responses are getting things right. Brady puts the objection in characteristically rationalist language:

At this point it is common for philosophers and psychologists to appeal to our capacity for *reason* as a solution to the problem of the lack of discrimination in our emotional responses. For there is a long-standing and venerable tradition according to which emotion needs to be monitored and controlled by reason: it is our capacity for rational reflection on our emotion situation that is essential as a check-and-balance on our emotional reactions. (2013: 100)

The indiscriminate nature of emotions explains why emotions often distort and why we need emotion-independent reason as a check on emotions.<sup>24</sup>

## 5.2 Responding to the argument from indiscriminacy

I suspect Brady is right that emotions are indiscriminate (although see below for a qualification about the alarm-bell metaphor); and in any case, sentimental perceptualists can accept this. What they should challenge is the following conditional premise: if our emotions are indiscriminate, then we need a more discriminating evaluative system to determine whether our emotional responses are getting things right. To see how they should challenge it, let's return to the perceptual analogy.

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<sup>24</sup> Ben-Ze'ev (2000: 170 – 71) develops a similar line of thought.

Take a case in which a hiker has a visual experience as of a shallow stream flowing over a bunch of rocks. Because the rocks are so far away, the shapes and colors she sees that trigger her visual experience of a stream are very much compatible with the absence of a stream.<sup>25</sup> The experience is thus indiscriminate in that it triggers on the basis of limited input (though it may not be indiscriminate in virtue of functioning according to a “better safe than sorry” principle). As she gets closer, she realizes that what she initially experienced as water is really just sunlight shimmering on a bed of rocks. She corrects her initial judgment by getting a better perspective on the matter.

This example helps us to notice something that can be misleading about the alarm-bell metaphor. Most alarms trigger on the basis of certain kinds of input, but are not so sophisticated that they cease firing when they get new input revealing the initial input to be misleading. For example, standard smoke alarms aren’t capable of registering that even though there is smoke around, there’s no need to sound the alarm, e.g., because the cook has everything under control. In contrast, when rustling sounds coming from the nearby foliage cause an agent to be afraid, the fear will (normally) dissipate if she learns that the rustling was caused by the wind. Similarly, when A steps on B’s toe, and B becomes angry, we can expect B’s anger to dissipate if he realizes that A unintentionally stumbled. Here, then, is the worry about the indiscriminacy argument: our emotions do tend to emerge on the basis of limited information about their object, but they also have a tendency to become more accurate as we learn more non-evaluative information. It’s thus natural for sentimental perceptualist to accept the following:

*Increasing Accuracy:* As we become aware of more non-evaluative information about a situation, our emotional responses tend to become more reliable.

In this way, emotions are, we might say, more akin to a guard-dog than an alarm-bell.<sup>26</sup>

### 5.3 The argument from stimulation

Now for the final shrewd rationalist objection. Brady argues that emotions have the function of *raising* evaluative questions; and he contends that this is ultimately a problem for those who believe

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<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, the proximal stimulations, or lower-level perceptual representations, that trigger a perceptual experience are almost always compatible with the representation’s being inaccurate. This is the so-called *underdetermination problem* for perception (Burge 2010).

<sup>26</sup> What if the emotion does not dissipate? Here I refer the reader back to my response to the argument from recalcitrance.

that emotions are a basic source of justification similar to perceptual experience. When Brady says emotions have the function of raising evaluative questions, he only means that it is something emotions do (emotions don't have the *biological* function of calling their accuracy into question, for example). The argument for this functional claim is simple. There is a great deal of evidence that emotion and attention are closely linked. An agent who experiences fear, for example, will generally have her attention drawn to the object of her fear. The fear will also generally compel her (all else equal) to continue focusing on the emotion's target. And this seems to be true of emotions generally. Although it may be obvious to many from experience, Brady notes that there is overwhelming scientific (neurophysiological and psychological, specifically) evidence for this connection. Given the connection between emotion and attention, and given the view that emotions present their objects as valuable in some way, it is a short step to the following:

I propose that one of the important things that attentional persistence can do is to enhance our representation of potentially significant objects and events, precisely by enabling us to discover reasons which bear on the accuracy of our initial emotional appraisals....[T]he persistence of attention in emotional experience can facilitate, by motivating the search for and discovery of reasons, a judgment as to whether emotional appearance in this instance really does match evaluative reality. (2013: 93)

In Brady's view, emotions play a crucial role in directing our attention to objects of potential importance which then often prompts reflection on whether the object really is important in the way the emotion presents it as being.

The well-supported thesis that emotions are prompters of reflection purportedly makes trouble for sentimental perceptualism:

[T]he proposal that emotions involve persistent attentional focus, and that this motivates the search for and discovery of reasons that are relevant to our emotional situation, suggests, interestingly enough, that it is *emotions themselves* that rule out our taking our initial emotional appraisals at face value. In other words, it is our emotions themselves that *raise*, rather than silence, the justificatory question... (2013: 96 - 7)

Although Brady allows that emotions present value in a perceptual-like way, he thinks it is a mistake to go from that psychological thesis to the normative thesis that emotions are the foundation of our evaluative beliefs in the way that perceptual experiences are the foundation of our empirical beliefs. Perception silences questions; emotion raises them (2013: 81 - 90).

### 5.3 Responding to the argument from stimulation

In what sense is it true that emotions prompt evaluative reflection? The remark that it is “*emotions themselves* that rule out our taking our initial emotional appraisals at face value” suggests that emotions *by their very nature* prompt evaluative reflection. But I doubt that is true. What emotions do by their nature is focus attention. That focusing of attention will only prompt evaluative reflection if certain other conditions are met, e.g., if we are careful and conscientious people.<sup>27</sup> All else equal, our emotions seem to cause us to act in ways stereotypical for whatever emotion is in question (Frijda 2007). For instance, anger naturally leads to retaliation, fear to fight or flight, and so on. Emotions *themselves* have a tendency to lead us to take the emotional presentation for granted and to act on that basis. To drive home the point that it’s not in the nature of emotions to prompt evaluative reflection, consider that for many emotions, humans and non-human animals are capable of experiencing those emotions, but animals do not engage in evaluative reflection on the accuracy of their emotions.

If there is only a highly contingent relationship between emotion and reflection, is this a problem for sentimental perceptualism? Sentimental perceptualists can reasonably argue that it is not. Let’s return, one last time, to the analogy. Our visual system, for instance, is bound up in intimate ways with visual forms of attention. Here is a helpful summary remark from a recent overview of the vast literature on visual attention:

[A]ttention allows us to optimize performance in visual tasks while overcoming the visual system’s limited capacity. Attention optimizes the use of the system’s limited resources by enhancing the representations of the relevant, while diminishing the representations of the less relevant, locations or features of our visual environment. Selective attention thus enables us to gather relevant information and guides our behavior – key factors in for the evolutionary success of an organism. (Carrasco 2011: 1486 – 7)

Many psychologists believe that visual experience is not best thought of as a purely sensory phenomenon but rather as one that involves both sensation and attention.<sup>28</sup> And if so, we might say, reasonably enough, that our visual systems promote empirical reflection on certain phenomena by

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<sup>27</sup> Brady (2013: 158 – 191) has much to say about the “virtuous regulation of attention” that indicates he would ultimately agree.

<sup>28</sup> Visual attentional phenomena occur at a very basic level. Carrasco notes, “Initially, there was a great deal of interest in categorizing mechanisms of vision as pre-attentive or attentive. The interest in that distinction has waned as many studies have shown that attention actually affects tasks that were once considered pre-attentive, such as contrast discrimination, texture segmentation and acuity” (1485).

focusing visual attention on certain spatial locations, properties, or objects. That the visual system might prompt reflection in this way, however, is no cause for us to worry that empirical knowledge must be obtained without reliance on perception. And as far as I can tell, matters are much the same with emotions. There is a way that emotional experience can lead to reflection on the accuracy of emotional experience, but only for the epistemologically benign reason that emotions make salient what they are about.

## 6 Conclusion

Sentimental perceptualists argue that emotions are the foundation of our evaluative knowledge just as perceptions are the foundation of our empirical knowledge. Historically, many rationalists have argued that not only are emotions not the ultimate source of evaluative knowledge but are actually of no value at all. Contemporary rationalists, however, concede that emotions have an important role to play in everyday learning about value. Some of these rationalists go on to propose what I have called *shrewd rationalist objections*: if we think more broadly about the uncontroversial epistemic roles emotions play (e.g., as heuristics, alarm-bells, or prompters of reflection), we will learn that they actually cannot also play a perceptual-like foundational role. But I have argued that whatever we think about the ultimate attractions and prospects of sentimental perceptualism, the shrewd rationalist objections shouldn't convince us to reject it.

Throughout the paper I spelled out some auxiliary commitments that we should expect sentimental perceptualists who take their perceptual analogy seriously to accept. Here are some of those commitments (the ones that were labeled):

*Background Principle Override*: we often have emotion-backed background beliefs about what is valuable that we use to override how things appear evaluatively at a given time.

*Background Conditions Override*: we often have background beliefs about when our emotions are likely to be reliable that we use to override how things appear evaluatively at a given time.

*Testimonial Override*: we often trust others evaluatively more than ourselves, at least in certain kinds of situations.

*Content Limits*: Emotions do not represent all types of values and are for the most part, albeit not exclusively, about what is significant for the agent experiencing the emotion.

*Increasing Accuracy: As we become aware of more non-evaluative information about a situation, our emotional responses tend to become more reliable.*

For any case in which rationalists insist that we don't need emotion to know a substantive evaluative proposition, the sentimental perceptualist, I predict, is going to have a reasonable way of recasting the phenomena, using ordinary perception as her model. Perhaps we shouldn't be sentimental perceptualists, but the shrewd rationalist objections, at least, shouldn't dissuade us.

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