**Penultimate Manuscript: Emotion as High-Level Perception – forthcoming in *Synthese***

According to the perceptual theory of emotions (Döring 2007; Roberts 2003; 2013; Tappolet 2016), emotions are perceptions of evaluative properties. On this account, to be disgusted is to perceive some object as disgusting, to be afraid is to perceive some object as fearsome and so on. Emotions are thus supposed to represent the relevant evaluative property and play a role in our mental economy analogous to that of perception. The account, however, has faced a barrage of objections recently by critics who point out various disanalogies between emotion and paradigmatic perceptual experiences. What many theorists fail to note however, is that many of the disanalogies that have been raised to exclude emotions from being perceptual states that represent evaluative properties have also been used to exclude high-level properties from appearing in the content of perception. This suggests that (1) emotions are perceptions of high level properties and (2) perceptual theorists can marshal the arguments used by proponents of high-level perception to defend the perceptual theory. This paper will defend an account of emotion as high-level perception.

I will begin by describing the motivation and features of the perceptual account and discuss the disanalogies that are supposed to challenge the perceptual theory (§1). I then show that the perceptual theory can adequately respond to the purported disanalogies to perception especially if we think of emotions along the lines of high-level perception (§2). Finally, I discuss one worry about the account: that it bars children and animals from having emotions (§3). To the contrary, I show that reflection on the problem yields support for understanding emotions along the model of high-level perception.

**§1 Introduction: The Perceptual Account and its Critics**

* 1. **The Perceptual Account**

The general motivation for the perceptual theory comes from three starting insights. First, emotions have a world-directed intentionality. For example, Sarah is angry about some perceived offence, Sam is fearful of the escaped gorilla, and Simon is sad about his dog’s passing. Secondly, emotions have correctness conditions and are thus assessable in terms of whether they fit the world. Sam’s fear of the escaped gorilla, for example, is correct or appropriate only if the gorilla really did pose a threat to him. Thirdly, there is a close connection between emotional experiences and evaluative judgment. Thus, Sarah’s anger at John’s perceived offence would normally go with her making the judgment that his behaviour was offensive. Our emotions therefore allow us to represent and respond to evaluative properties in our environment.

Historically, these considerations led first to the adoption of the evaluative judgment theory of emotion (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 2004); on this approach emotions simply are a form of evaluative judgment. Anger is therefore simply the judgment that some agent has committed an unwarranted offence against me, fear is the judgment that the relevant object is fearful, and sadness is the judgment that some cherished object has been lost.

What the judgmental theory fails to capture, however, is the fact that emotions are recalcitrant (Döring 2009). In other words, an emotion can persist even in the face of the relevant contrary evaluative judgment. Thus, Sarah may judge that John had not really offended her but continue to be angry at him, and Simon may continue to be sad about his dog even if he manages to make the stoical judgment that no real loss has occurred. Perceptual theorists have been impressed especially by how the phenomenon of emotional recalcitrance reflects the phenomenon of perceptual illusions. For example, one can perceive a stick in water as bent even while making the judgment that the stick is straight, and one can continue to see the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as of different lengths even while making the judgment that the lines are the same length. This has therefore led many theorists to propose the perceptual theory of emotions: emotions are *perceptions* of evaluative properties.

The specific perceptual theory that I will defend in this paper is Roberts’ view of emotions as concern-based construals. Emotions are therefore a kind of conceptual perception: to use Roberts’ language, something is perceived “in terms of something else”. To illustrate this, he asks us to consider the image of the famous duck-rabbit. One can see the image *as* either a duck or a rabbit. This example is a case where the image is ambiguous between two construals, but this sort of perception occurs even in more ordinary contexts. For example, as I look over my kitchen table, I see not merely blotches of red and brown, but construe these as apples and tomatoes. As Roberts notes, it is crucial here that “a construal is not an interpretation laid over a neutrally perceived object, but a characterization of the object, a way the *object* presents itself.” (Roberts, 2003: 80) We should thus not think of construals as interpretive beliefs or schemes that we lay onto what is really the perception of low-level sensible properties. Instead, they are part of the way an object presents itself to us in perception. The idea that we perceive high-level properties is of course controversial, but as we shall see, it is noteworthy that the same objections that are raised against the perceptual account are similarly raised against high-level perception.

What does it mean, however, that emotions are *concern-based* construals? The rough thought is that a certain object is seen in terms that impinge on the agent’s concerns in some way. To use Roberts’ example, to be afraid is not just to see something as endangering some random object, but to see the situation as endangering something that one holds dear.[[1]](#footnote-1) Roberts then proceeds to make a suggestion about how emotions can be individuated by characterising them under specific schemas of concern-based construals. For example, the fear of X is the construal of X as an aversive possibility of significant degree of probability calling for it to be avoided. What is to be noticed here is that unlike perceptual theorists who believe that emotions are analogous to non-conceptual perception[[2]](#footnote-2) (e.g. Tappolet, 2016) (such as the perception of red), the evaluative property in the emotion’s content is here presented with significant structure. Once again, I will later show how this allows the proposal to account for some of the supposed disanalogies with perception.

Before going on, it would be helpful to clarify here exactly what the perceptual theory is committed to in drawing the analogy with perception. It would be pointless to prattle off a list of analogies and disanalogies between paradigmatic cases of perception and emotion as if the task were merely to see if emotions are more like perception than not. The crucial point for perceptual theorists is that emotions play a certain role in our mental economy that paradigmatic cases of perception also play. Now, it may well be that emotions play additional roles to those of paradigmatic perception or that what enables our emotions to play this role is different than in the case of say visual perception,[[3]](#footnote-3) but unless this gives us reason to think that it bars emotion from playing its specified role in our mental economy, this would not count as a point against the perceptual theory. Three aspects of this role are important. First, like perception, our emotions allow us to access and represent properties in the world. Second, like perception, our emotions allow us to act responsively to the relevant features of our environment. And third, like perception, our emotions play the epistemic role of justifying the corresponding beliefs about evaluative properties.

Let me make a few remarks to clarify this last aspect.[[4]](#footnote-4) Specifying the epistemic role of perception is controversial. For example, there is a live debate between coherentist and foundationalist views of justification over whether perceptual experience provides immediate justification for certain beliefs or whether it only does so in conjunction with certain other background beliefs.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate this dispute, but I am going to assume that perception provides immediate prima facie justification for the relevant beliefs (See Pryor, 2005) and provide a rough sketch of the conditions that have to be met for it to play this epistemic role. I understand immediate justification here to imply two things: (1) an agent’s perception that p can ground a belief that p through a direct and non-inferential process and (2) prima facie justification for the belief that p does not depend on that agent having any other further beliefs.

There are plausibly two additional conditions that must be met for a perception to justify the relevant belief. First, we need to include some sort of no-defeater condition. Thus, a perception that p only provides justification for the belief only if the agent has no good reason to believe that she should distrust that perception. Sally’s perception that there is a vase in front of her does not justify her belief if she has good reason to think that she is in a mirror maze. Similarly, Tom’s fear justifies his belief that there is danger in the environment unless he has good reason to think that he has just been injected with adrenaline.

Second, we may also want to require that the perceptual process needs to have been formed by an appropriate etiology.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is perhaps most clear in the case of high-level skilled perception.[[7]](#footnote-7) Take the perception of affordances that a pro basketball player has as opposed to that of a badly-practiced amateur – they both perceive the affordances of moves they could make in the game but the amateur repeatedly appears to perceive that he can make such and such a shot in such a situation when he really cannot while the pro perceives and makes the relevant moves. The pro player develops this skilled perception through the process of careful practice, whereas the amateur develops his perception through sloppy practice. One may have the intuition here that the amateur’s perception does not even provide the appropriate justification because of its improper etiology. In the same way, one may consider that our emotional perceptions provide immediate justification only if we are the subject of proper emotional upbringing.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps we don’t want to count those with certain sorts of emotional disorders as providing even prima facie justification to their beliefs for this reason, even if they are unaware of these disorders and so lack defeaters for their beliefs.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Specifying the conditions for proper etiology is difficult here, and this might lead to an objection. This is that unless the perceptual theorist is able to specify the conditions under which our emotions are defective at tracking evaluative properties, that theory is inadequate. Thus, Salmela (2011) has pointed out that because of the deep disagreement over evaluative facts it is near impossible to specify the conditions under which our emotions are reliable at tracking evaluative properties.[[10]](#footnote-10) General agreement on perceptual facts allows us to specify when some ordinary perceptual process has gone wrong, and without this general agreement for evaluative facts we are unable to specify the relevant conditions for emotion.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is a fair point, and I think that a full response to this worry requires an account of the nature of evaluative properties and their relation to our emotions. I myself am broadly sympathetic to fitting attitude accounts of value where evaluative properties (or at least the sentimental values such as the disgusting and the fearsome) are constituted by some relationship to the emotions themselves.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, I want to remain neutral on an account of evaluative properties in this paper. One could even adopt an error-theoretic approach to evaluative properties and still think that emotions are a kind of perception. The representation of properties that are presented to us in emotions would then be systematically incorrect as in the case of a persistent illusion. Illusions are of course, widely accepted to be perceptual states or (if one is a disjunctivist) at least plays a role in our mental economy somewhat analogous to paradigmatic perception. In what follows, then, I bracket concerns stemming from the nature of evaluative properties themselves and focus on the analogy between the character of perception and emotion.

* 1. **Disanalogies with Perception**

The purported disanalogies between emotion and perception fall broadly into two groups. One group concerns disanalogies of a broadly epistemic nature, while the other concerns disanalogies that are due to what we may roughly call the affective nature of emotion. I will describe both in turn, marking the points ‘E’ for epistemic disanalogies and ‘A’ for affective disanalogies.

*E1: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions are states for which reasons are needed. (Brady 2012; Deonna and Teroni 2012)*

When someone reports seeing a red apple, we do not often ask ‘why?’, where the question is a query for the explanatory or justificatory reason for the perception. Such questions may of course arise where one suspects a defeater is afoot, say when we believe we are in a mirror maze at the carnival. In ordinary cases, however, we usually do not see ordinary perception as a state that requires reasons but instead a state that provides reasons for some perceptual judgment. By contrast, it is often the case that we ask such questions about our emotions even when we have no reason to think that defeaters are present. When someone is afraid of, say a dog, it still makes sense to ask why the person is afraid of the dog.

Deonna and Teroni point out that this issue arises because emotions depend on and are justified via their cognitive bases. According to them, cognitive bases are a mental state other than the emotion which supplies the intentional object of the emotion. Thus, one’s fear of some dog is parasitic on one’s (ordinary) perception of the dog in some way. The cognitive base, however, need not be restricted to perceptions and includes beliefs as well. Thus, one’s anger at being treated unfairly by one’s boss may be parasitic on one’s belief that one’s boss has unfairly overlooked you at the closed door promotional meeting. According to them, we often refer to the properties ascribed to some object in the cognitive base to justify our emotions. Thus, when asked why we were afraid of the dog, we point to the dog’s sharp teeth and the fact that it appears to be running around wildly.

Furthermore, they point out that we rarely justify our emotions by referring to the evaluative property that, according to the perceptual theory, the emotion represents the object as having. Instead, when asked why we feel a certain emotion, we describe non-evaluative properties of the relevant object. Notice that we rarely point to the fearsomeness of the dog when asked to justify our fear, instead, we often point to non-evaluative aspects of the situation such as its sharp teeth and apparently wild demeanour. Queries for justification of our emotion therefore proceed by “explaining the subject’s way of apprehending those [non-evaluative] aspects of the situation in light of which her emotional attitude is assessed as correct or incorrect” (2012: 95). All of this would be puzzling, if, as the perceptual theory supposed, emotions were perceptions of evaluative properties.

*E2: Emotions are not perceptions because the evaluative content of emotions is due to informational enrichment. (Dokic and Lemaire 2013)*

According to Dokic and Lemaire, the evaluative content of emotion is not something that is perceptually presented in the way that, say, the colour red or the square-ness of an object is presented in perception. Instead, the evaluative content only *appears* to be presented but in fact is the result of further cognitive processing on non-evaluative contents that are really presented in perception. This process they call ‘informational enrichment’. The idea is that perception really presents to us only basic sensible properties, but as a result of a further cognitive process, we come to imbue that experience with evaluative content. In their words, “what we take to be the intentional content of the emotion of fear is its truly non-evaluative content plus the conceptual categorization of this object as being dangerous, a categorization that does not itself rely on the emotion but only on our recognitional capacities with regard to the objects of our visual perception.” (2013: 237) The point being made here is that because some further cognitive processing is required in the representation of the evaluative content emotions are not forms of perception.

*E3: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions are inferentially related to other emotions. (Salmela 2011)*

One feature of sensory perception is its modularity and informational encapsulation – there are no inferential connections between different instances of sensory perception. My seeing a red patch does not create any rational pressure to see some blue patch right next to it. Emotions, however, despite displaying some form of modularity in cases of emotional recalcitrance, appear to impose rational constraints on each other. For example, if Sam is afraid of the gorilla, he should also feel relief when the threat of the gorilla is removed. And if Simon is sad about the perceived death of his dog, he should feel joy when he learns that he was mistaken about the dog’s death. Once again, this appears to count against emotion being a form of perception.

*A1: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions involve an affective, valenced response to the relevant object. (Mitchell 2019)*

Here is how Mitchell (2019) describes this point: unlike paradigmatic cases of perception, the experience of emotion involves “being consciously moved by something, as a personal level affective *response* to the object of the experience, and its properties.” Emotions affect us in a peculiar way that it seems no ordinary perception would. At the same time, the affectivity of emotions are divided into two distinct types that have been described as positive and negative valence. For example, joy and relief are positively valenced while fear and anger are negative valenced. Valence here refers to some phenomenological quality that all emotions share but which appear to be wholly lacking in perception.

*A2: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions violate the transparency thesis. (Deonna and Teroni 2012; Mitchell 2019)*

The transparency thesis (Harman 1990) is a thesis about what occurs in perceptual experience. According to transparency, when we have a perceptual experience and we attempt to introspect the nature of that experience, we are directed outwards to describing apparent properties of the world. For example, when asked to introspect our experience of the perception of a red apple, one would naturally end up describing properties of the apple: its redness, its roundish shape and so on. When we attempt to introspect into the nature of our emotional experiences, however, things are not so straightforward. Part of the description of our experience may surely refer to the world (e.g. we may describe the sharp teeth of the dog or its intimidating quality), however, an important part of the nature of emotional experience includes describing how we have been affected.

What exactly, then, does emotional introspection reveal besides properties in the world? Here theorists are divided. Some hold that a key part of emotional experience includes the feeling of bodily changes. Thus, Deonna and Teroni claim that, “If you are to describe how it feels to be frightened by a spider, you would not do so in terms of the spider’s qualities, but rather in terms of how it feels to experience a jolt up your spine, your hair standing on end, your teeth clenching, muscles freezing, heart jumping, etc.” (2012: 69) On the other hand, Mitchell (2019) claims that introspection indicates that part of our emotional experience is the phenomenology of being affected or moved by the relevant object, where the notion of being affected is not understood in terms of bodily feelings. Mitchell goes a step further here: he claims that it is *through* the experience of being moved by some object that we come to represent that object as having the relevant evaluative property. According to him, “my being psychologically affected (again ‘consciously moved’) seems to acquaint me with the dangerousness of the gorilla”. These suggest that emotional experience is radically different from perceptual experience and thus that emotions are not a form of perception.

**§2 Emotion and High-Level Perception**

This section has two parts. In the first part, I show that the criticisms that have been made to bar emotion from counting as perception have also been levelled against the idea that perception of high-level properties counts as a genuine instance of perception. In addition, I will also show that high-level perception shares certain features with emotion. The comparison serves two purposes. In the first place, it establishes a conditional argument for the perceptual theory: if one thinks that the relevant features do not bar high-level perception from counting as a genuine instance of perception, then neither should it bar emotion from being a kind of perception. In the second place, it strengthens my argument for the specific form of perceptual theory that I favour; the concern-based construal theory. In the second part, drawing on some of the resources that defenders of high-level perception have used, I will show why the disanalogies provide no reason to think that emotions are not perceptions.

**2.1 High-Level Perception and its Critics**

It would be useful to begin by giving a brief description of high-level perception.[[13]](#footnote-13) Let’s focus on the case of visual perception, which has been the focus of most of the literature. Suppose there is a basketball on the table and I am looking at it. It is uncontroversial that part of my perceptual experience includes such properties as the orange colour and the round shape. Does it include, however, the property of being a basketball? No doubt I believe that it is a basketball, but the question is whether this is properly a part of my perception. Proponents of high-level perception say that such properties are part of perceptual experience, while opponents say that they don’t appear in perceptual experience. Properties like ‘being a basketball’, which Siegel calls kind properties (2006) , are only one type of property that have been argued as being a part of perception. In addition, some have argued that actionable properties (such as being edible) (Nanay 2011) and affordances (opportunities for action that are afforded by the environment) (Siegel 2014) also feature in perceptual experience. Let me now point out how High-level perception faces similar objections and shares certain features with the perceptual account.

First, as with the case of emotions, we may object to states with high level content being perceptions because they are states for which we require reasons and thus cannot play the role of immediately justifying judgments of that content (E1) (Masrour, 2011: 381-3). As Masrour notes, the objector here points to the fact that when someone reports a putative case of perception of high level content, part of our reason-giving practice involves getting the person to justify the perception. Furthermore, we seem to give reasons for high-level content in terms of low-level properties. Thus, when someone asks why we see a basketball, we point to its orange colour and its round shape. This is parallel to the reason-giving practice of justifying evaluative content, where, as Deonna and Teroni note, we point to non-evaluative properties of the object involved to explain why it has the relevant evaluative property.

Second, high level perception can also be objected to on the grounds that it is not psychologically immediate. This is so in the sense that one comes to believe that some object has a high level property only inferentially and not immediately (Masrour, 2011: 375-381). The idea, again as with the objection levelled against emotion, is that the high-level property only emerges because of some further cognitive processing or ‘informational enrichment’ (E2). This then bars it from counting as a case of perception.

Thirdly, certain kinds of high level perception also bear inferential connections to each other (E3). Consider viewing the protruded end of the duck-rabbit figure as the ears of the rabbit. While one perceives the protruded end as the ears of the rabbit, one appears ‘committed’ also to view the small indentation to the right as the mouth of the rabbit. One cannot both perceive the protruded end as the ears of the rabbit while viewing the indentation as the back of the duck’s head *at the same time*. The reason for this is, of course, that each perception is backgrounded by a construal of the image as either the duck or the rabbit and not both. This example also carries over to more mundane situations. If one sees a green patch as the leaf of a tree, one is ‘committed’ to viewing the rest of the relevant green patches as leaves as well. There is some sense, therefore, in which some high-level perceptions ‘impose constraints’ on each other.

Fourthly, consider the perception of what Siegel (2014) calls *experienced mandates*. Experienced mandates are a type of affordance that she calls soliciting affordances: according to her “an affordance by *X* (hair, forest, cake) of phi-ability is a *soliciting* affordance for a subject S, if it is experienced by S as soliciting, inviting, or otherwise prompting *S* herself to phi”. (2014: 54) The phenomenology of such experiences includes what she calls a *feeling of answerability* whereby one experiences the relevant object as calling one to respond. A vivid example she gives of this is in speaking to someone whose long fringe just falls over one of their eyes and one experiences the hair as calling to be moved aside. Other possible instances of experienced mandates can occur when one hears one’s name called or in the case of incessant visual advertising – one perceives them as soliciting some action. According to her, perceiving an experienced mandate involves “unavoidable response, either in answering directly or ignoring.” (2014: 56) Experienced mandates appear to have both the affective features of emotions. They are certainly affective experiences in the sense that one experiences being moved by the relevant object, and there may be some analog to valence in that the affordance may be attractive or aversive (A1). Furthermore, introspection into the phenomenology of experienced mandates will also likely violate the transparency thesis (A2). For the description of one’s experience will not only include ascribing some property to the relevant object, but also a description of how one is moved to act. Indeed, one may be tempted to make Mitchell’s point here that the experience represents the objects as having the property of having some soliciting affordance *via* the feeling of one being moved to act in a certain way.

The similarities between emotion and high-level perceptions are therefore striking. Insofar as one believes that these features pose no barrier to high-level perception, then, one should also accept the perceptual account. In the next section, I’ll argue more directly for the perceptual account by showing why these features do not bar emotions from being perceptual states.

**2.2 Defending the Perceptual Account**

It would be useful at this point to recall what is really at stake in calling emotions kinds of perception. It is *not* to claim that emotions are in every sense like paradigmatic perceptions, but that emotions play specific roles in our mental economy that paradigmatic perceptions also play. These are that emotions (1) allow us to access and represent evaluative properties in the world, (2) play the epistemic role of justifying our beliefs about its content and (3) allow us to act responsively to the relevant features of our environment. Let’s now revisit the specific objections that have been raised.

*E1: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions are states for which reasons are needed.*

If it were true that emotions are states for which reasons are needed, then this obviously threatens the claim that they can provide immediate justification to evaluative judgment. However, the evidence used to support this claim is a *non-sequitur*. Recall that Deonna and Teroni appealed to our reason giving practices to show that emotions require justifying reasons. The idea is that we typically don’t appeal to our emotion when explaining why we think some object has the relevant evaluative property and we instead appeal to non-evaluative properties of the object in question which presumably constitute that evaluative property. For example, when one is asked why one is afraid of a dog, one usually points to the dog’s sharp teeth or its wild manner. As noted, this is a general point that applies to the case of high-level perception as well: we often present reasons for high-level content in terms of low-level sensory content.

However, as Masrour notes, it is “false that we can never provide reasons for sensory beliefs in terms of non-sensory [high-level] experience.” (2011: 382) He cites the example of someone looking at a tomato in an ambiguous lighting condition where you cannot clearly make out its colour. In this situation, the fact that you are looking at a tomato is prima facie reason to think that it is not blue. We can conceive of similar situations in the emotion case as well. Consider a new war reporter following a hardened soldier as he treks through a dense forest. At some point, the soldier tells the reporter to halt because here is danger ahead. When asked why he think so, the soldier can do no better than to refer to a sense of fear that he has.

What the example makes clear is that our reason giving practices always take place against a background of a set of assumptions about what can be taken for granted in the situation. This is why Deonna and Teroni’s claim that the full answer to a justificatory request is to give an account of all the relevant properties of the subject and the object as well as the relations between them is implausible (2012: 95). They mention, for example, that when one is asked why one is afraid of a lion, one needs to refer to the fact that he is made of flesh and blood and other relations between him and the animal. In fact, what often happens is that one provides reasons until the questioner can see the *evaluative* point of those features. And indeed, if the questioner lacks the capacity to see the evaluative point of the features, even giving the full description that Deonna and Teroni refer to would make no sense.[[14]](#footnote-14) As Deonna and Teroni themselves note, someone could consider the situation involving a dog with sharp teeth chasing a fleshly human simply hilarious.

The situation is the same with respect to our reason giving practices for high-level properties. According to Masrour:

“I see an apple on the shelf. Why do I believe that the thing is an apple? My real reason is: ‘it just looks that way’. Now if you question my reason, it indicates to me that you do not share this reason. So it is quite likely that I will descend to a lower epistemic status and give you reasons in terms of its shape and color, reasons that I think you can have.” (2011: 383)

The fact that we point to non-evaluative properties when asked to give reasons for our emotions is therefore not a clear indication that emotions require reasons. Instead this merely “reflects contingent facts about our environment, differences in expertise, and the demands of reason-giving practice” (ibid.).

One may, however, raise a different but related objection here. Even if we disarm the worry that arises from asking ‘why’ questions that are queries about *epistemic* justification, it appears that there are other ‘why’ questions that can be raised about our emotions that are not ordinarily raised against paradigmatic cases of perception.[[15]](#footnote-15) This appears to also be a significant disanalogy that threatens the proposal that emotions are a form of perception. Thus, we can ask ‘why’ questions that are a kind of normative or prudential query (e.g. “Why did you get angry with your boss, don’t you know it is a waste of time and energy being frustrated with her?”) and it may also be a causal or motivational query (e.g. “Why are you so sensitive about her demeaning comment today?” Where the answer may be something along the lines of: “I had bad sleep” or “My kids were giving me a hard time”.) We don’t seem to make such queries with respect to paradigmatic cases of perception.

There are two ways to respond to this further objection. Firstly, we may note once again that while we don’t ordinarily ask these questions about our perceptual experiences, it is possible that such questions can arise depending on the context of the query. This is clear in the case of high-level perception. When the expert bird watcher sees a Scarlet Ibis at yonder tree, the novice may reasonably ask, “Why do you see a Scarlet Ibis?” that is a causal query. The answer to this question would then make some reference to the years of training that the expert has to develop this high level perception. We can also imagine situations where a normative query of one’s perception can arise. For example, imagine a racist who perceives members of a certain race as posing some kind of danger or sees them as freeloaders. It seems reasonable to ask, “Why do you see them in this way?”, where the query is not epistemic or causal but normative. These sorts of ‘why’ questions are thus not limited to emotion alone.

Secondly, it is crucial again to remember that all the perceptual theorist claims is that emotions play a certain role in our mental economy that is shared with perception, and this leaves it open that our emotions may play additional roles over and above those that perception plays. Part of the role that is shared with perception is the epistemic one of immediately justifying beliefs, which is why it is crucial to disarm the epistemic disanalogies that have been raised against the perceptual account. It may well be that it is a result of the other roles that emotion plays that give rise to these other kinds of query. Thus, for example, it may be the fact that our emotions have a more intimate link to action that gives rise to the normative or prudential queries that are regularly raised about our emotions.

*E2: Emotions are not perceptions because the evaluative content of emotions is due to informational enrichment.*

The idea behind the accusation of informational enrichment is that the evaluative content represented in our emotions is a result of further cognitive processing on an ordinary perception. As Masrour notes, there are two ways to understand the idea that a further cognitive process occurs before the high-level content appears (2011: 376). One could understand this as referring to a personal-level inference or some sub-personal process. The personal-level reading is implausible because phenomenologically we do not seem to be aware of making some inference from non-evaluative properties to evaluative properties. As Dokic and Lemaire (2013: 237) themselves point out “this enrichment need not be acknowledged by the subject herself” and credit this fact with explaining why many have been seduced by the perceptual theory. We should therefore take the reading that the processing is meant to be a sub-personal process. The relevant question then becomes whether the fact that a sub-personal process intervenes in representing evaluative or high-level content implies that that content does not properly belong to perception.

We must first note another ambiguity when we say that high level content is represented as a result of a sub-personal process on low level content. Does this refer to a sub-personal process working on (1) the low-level contents of *personal level* representation or (2) a sub-personal process that works directly on the raw sub-personal information we receive in the early visual system. It may appear that we encounter both kinds of cases. When the veteran soldier walks into unfamiliar territory and suddenly develops a sense of fear, he may not have personal level access to the low-level content on which the property of danger or fearsome-ness supervenes. However, when one reads the news about the looming recession and then comes to believe that one may lose one’s job and begins to fear, it appears the process is working on low-level contents at the personal level. Similarly, while in most cases of high-level perception the low-level contents are represented as well, this is not always the case. Thus, in the case of chicken-sexers (Bayne 2009), it seems that they perceive the high-level property of the chicken’s sex without perceiving the low-level properties (whatever they are) that indicate the chicken’s sex.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Should this sub-level processing bar these from counting as cases of genuine perception? I don’t think so. As Masrour (2011) notes, even much of what we would consider low-level properties in perception are the result of cognitive processing on sub-personal representations. For example, depth perception depends on input from both eyes as well as textural cues and proprioceptive information. Yet it seems mistaken to bar depth properties from appearing in perception because it undergoes this kind of “informational enrichment”. If evaluative and high-level properties are the result of sub-personal processing on sub-personal representations, then it would be unreasonable to discount them from perception – indeed one would think that almost all the properties represented in perception are the result of sub-personal processing on sub-personal representations.

What about the case where the sub-personal process appears to work on personal level representation? The first thing to say here is that it is not clear that this is what is really going on in such cases. We presume that the process operates on personal level information because the agent can report on the personal level representation on which the high-level property is supposed to supervene. It seems to me equally plausible that the personal-level representation of both the high and the low-level contents are the result of processing directly on sub-personal representations. Consider, for example, that one may read the news, quickly scanning through the various headlines and begin to develop a sense of foreboding about one’s livelihood without yet being able to point out it is because one has read about the recession and is fearing for one’s job. The advantage of such a proposal then is that it provides a unified account for how evaluative and high-level properties are represented as opposed to invoking two separate processes, one working on personal level information and the other on sub-personal information. Even if this is mistaken, one may still wonder if the fact that the process works on personal level representation really implies that the higher-level contents cannot feature in the perceptual role. As mentioned, it is likely that nearly all the properties that are present in perception require some form of sub-personal processing. It is not therefore obvious that this sort of ‘informational enrichment’ should trouble the perceptual theory.

*E3: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions are inferentially related to other emotions.*

Recall that emotions are supposed to be inferentially related in the sense that having one emotion appears to ‘rationally constrain’ the other kinds of emotions the agent can have. If one is afraid of losing one’s pet dog, one is also ‘committed’ to feeling relief when one’s dog is safe and to feeling sad when one’s pet dog is irrevocably lost. We also saw that a similar phenomenon occurs in high-level perception: if one sees the protruded left side of the duck-rabbit as the ears of a rabbit, one is similarly ‘committed’ to seeing the indentation on the right as the mouth of the rabbit. What I think this shows is that there are structural relations in the representation of the various properties that preclude each other. As mentioned, in the duck-rabbit case what is going on is that one is construing the protruded end as a pair of ears against the background of construing the whole image as a rabbit. So long as one holds the background construal fixed, one is similarly unable to construe any part of the figure as parts of a duck. In the same way, when one is afraid of losing one’s pet dog, one construes the salient possibility of losing one’s pet dog against the background of a deep concern for the dog’s welfare. Holding that background concern in place, the various variations in the situation lend themselves to being construed as occasions of relief when the dog is safe and sadness when the possibility of losing the dog becomes actual.

What does this show? I think it would be a bit too strong to say that our emotions really impose rational constraints on each other. Again, all it suggests is that there are structural relations between the various properties that preclude them from being perceived at the same time. This sort of possibility appears even in low-level perception: consider that our seeing a certain surface as completely black precludes us from seeing any part of that surface as red. Yet surely this does not imply that our perception of the colour black imposes rational constraints on seeing the surface as red. I conclude therefore that the fact that emotions display this feature does not disqualify them from being perceptions.

*A1: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions involve an affective, valenced response to the relevant object.*

*A2: Emotions are not perceptions because emotions violate the transparency thesis.*

Let’s take the affective disanalogies together. Emotions are supposed to be distinct from perceptions because we are affected by them in some way, they typically appear in two valenced flavours and they violate the transparency thesis in the sense that introspection into emotional experience reveals not just the evaluative property some object appears to have but also our sense of being moved. As I’ve mentioned, it appears that the perception of a certain kind of affordance which Siegel calls experienced mandates also shares some of these features.

Now there seems to be a simple reason why emotions are affective and valenced: at least on Roberts’ proposal, it is because emotions are concern-based construals. It is the very fact that our concerns appear to be at stake in the situation that we experience emotions as affective. As Roberts puts it, “Affect is not something in addition to emotion, but is the way the concern-based construal feels to the person experiencing the emotion” (2013: 48). We may also account for the valence of the emotion as a result then of whether the situation is construed as conducive or threatening to our background concern.

Mitchell (2019) raises two objections to this suggestion. Firstly, he notes that the perceptualist needs to give a non-question-begging reason as to why the evaluative content (i.e. the concern-based construal) only generates affective experience when it is a part of some emotion when the same content can appear in, say belief, but lack this affectivity. I don’t think one can really give a non-question begging response to this question. However, there are many properties that gain a distinct phenomenology when represented in perception as opposed to when they are represented in belief. It is therefore no surprise that the evaluative content only generates affective phenomenology when it appears in the content of a perceptual state as opposed to an evaluative judgment.

The second objection that Mitchell raises to this view is that it does not do justice to the phenomenology of emotional experience, specifically in the way that emotions are supposed to violate the transparency thesis. According to Mitchell, this proposal fails because it does not capture the fact that the evaluative properties of the object are represented *through* what he calls affective attitudes. The example he gives is that it is “my being psychologically affected … seems to acquaint me with the dangerousness of the gorilla” (2019). What the perceptual theory fails to do then is in not saying enough about the ‘mental paint’ or the properties of the mental vehicle that serves the function of representing the evaluative property.

It is a little difficult to know what to make of this objection since it depends on a very specific take on the phenomenology of emotional experience. I find it hard to determine through introspection whether it is my feeling of being moved that represents the evaluative property of the relevant object or if I experience being moved in response to the phenomenology that arises from the independent representation of the evaluative property. Indeed, what Mitchell wants to say ultimately is even more nuanced: he claims that our affective attitude represents the object’s evaluative property in such a way that the evaluative property is “experienced as having the power to motivate the affective attitude” which does the representing. Part of the way the affective attitude represents the evaluative property then also includes some form of self-reference. It appears to me that what is going on is that Mitchell and the perceptual theorist are taking different notions as primitive. Mitchell seems to consider the notion of ‘affective attitude’ as primitive and then seeks to explain the phenomenology of emotional representation of evaluative properties in terms of that. Whereas on the perceptualist view, it is the phenomenology of the perceptual representation of evaluative properties that is taken as primitive and then used to explain affect. It is not obvious to me that we have a clear method of adjudicating between the two.

Regardless of how the issue pans out, I don’t think that Mitchell’s point really troubles the perceptual theory. As Mitchell himself notes, his view is distinct from the perceptual view “not in virtue of either (1) a disagreement about the (evaluative) intentional content of affective experiences (i.e. what they represent), or (2) in being a first-order intentional view, but rather, in being a first-order *affective*-*attitude* view, which more closely reflects the phenomenology of response salient in affective experience” (2019). The main point that Mitchell wants to make then is that the way evaluative properties are represented in emotional experience is distinct from how they are represented in paradigmatic cases of perception. Recall, however, that what the perceptualist is committed to is not that emotion shares every feature with paradigmatic cases of perception but rather the claim that emotion plays a number of crucial roles that paradigmatic cases of perception also play. Once again, these roles are that emotions (1) allow us to access and represent evaluative properties in the world, (2) play the epistemic role of immediately justifying our beliefs about its content and (3) allow us to act responsively to the relevant features of our environment. The implementational vehicle by which emotions represent the evaluative content may well differ from paradigmatic cases of perception, but that does not by itself bar emotion from playing those roles.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I conclude, therefore, that neither the epistemic nor the affective disanalogies need trouble the perceptual theory.

**§3 What About the Children?**

In this final section, I consider and briefly respond to one common objection that has been raised to viewing emotions as analogous to high-level perceptions. According to this objection, this proposal would imply that children and animals do not have emotions, something which appears obviously false. The construal view, like high-level perception in general, depends on the subject having various sorts of conceptual capacities. The idea is that it seems unlikely that children and animals would have such sophisticated conceptual capacities and that if these capacities are required to have emotions, then children and animals are barred from having emotions. According to Tappolet (2016: 14-5), who raises this objection, we should therefore consider the perceptual representation of evaluative properties as non-conceptual. Perceiving something as fearsome, for example, would then be akin to perceiving something as red.

Roberts has given a plausible defence of his account against this charge in various places (Roberts, 2003: 107-9, 2009, 2013: 89-90), the key point being that this objection both overestimates the amount of cognitive complexity required to have such conceptual capacities and perhaps also underestimates the cognitive capabilities of animals and children.[[18]](#footnote-18) A dog obviously lacks linguistic concepts and so will not be able to articulate with any specificity the various elements of the construal, but it seems reasonable that a dog would have some notion of its concerns and is able to distinguish between the various ways events may threaten or promote its concerns.[[19]](#footnote-19) With this capacity, the dog may then perceive, for example, some other dog as a threat to its concern to mate with some potential partner. This may then be a primitive form of jealousy.

I think Roberts’ defence is broadly plausible, but I want to make a different point in this context. The point is this: insofar as we consider very young children or lower animals to lack these conceptual capacities, so far would it also seem implausible that the sort of epistemic features that we have been discussing really apply to their ‘emotions’. For example, it would seem unlikely to think that the emotions of young children impose the sort of ‘rational constraint’ discussed above on each other. We don’t accuse children of irrationality when they ‘bite the hand that feeds them’, suggesting that their primitive emotions don’t have the structural relations to generate the sorts of constraints that Salmela mentions. If we do think that the epistemic features mentioned above are genuine features of emotion that need to be accounted for, then this confirms the idea that emotions are best thought of along the lines of high-level perception.

This might raise the question: how then should we think of what appear to be emotions in very young children and lower animals? There are two possibilities here. One possibility is to grant that infants and lower animals have emotions, but in a different sense than that of mature humans or the higher animals. In a conciliatory spirit, one may grant that Tappolet’s non-conceptual theory is correct insofar as it applies to children, but that as part of the developmental process the emotions of mature human adults have become that of concern-based construals.[[20]](#footnote-20)

However, I think that there is another more promising possibility. This is to say that specific emotional capacities are only acquired when the required conceptual capacities are available. Let me sketch this out with reference to the emotional development of human infants. Some psychologists have claimed that emotions are innate and present from very early childhood by pointing to universal facial expressions that are present early on (e.g. Izard, 1991). However, we should be cautious about taking these results at face value. These emotional expressions have been shown to unreliably correlate with the expected emotional elicitors during the first months of life (Bennett, Bendersky, and Lewis 2002; 2005) and they also do not coordinate consistently with internal autonomic changes associated with the emotion (Lewis 2011). This need not mean that infants experience no emotions at all, but that we should hesitate to take their expressions to be indicative of specific emotions such as anger or sadness. Presumably, infants have some concept of their concerns and when they are satisfied or not. If we take emotions to be concern-based construals, then we can count them as having some very generalised form of negative and positive affect. On the view I am proposing, they obtain more specific emotions as they develop the conceptual machinery required to construe situations in various ways. Thus, we may consider an early form of anger to be construing the situation as frustrating one’s expected control over something one is concerned about. The infant is then only able to experience anger when she is able to construe the situation as such.[[21]](#footnote-21) This proposal is consistent with the differentiation viewpoint in developmental psychology, where specific emotions arise out of a more broad-spectrum, generalised emotional state (See Camras, 2011; Sroufe, 1996).

The suggestions here are ultimately speculative, and depend in the end on further empirical work. Regardless, the point remains that careful consideration of the case of very young children and animals vindicates rather than challenges the thought that, at least in mature human adults, emotions are a form of high-level perception.

**§4 Conclusion**

This paper has offered a defence against certain objections of a specific form of the perceptual theory of emotions, namely, Roberts’ concern-based construal theory, which sees emotions as analogous to high-level perception. I’ve defended this account by pointing out both similarities with other kinds of high-level perceptions as well as by pointing out how certain purported disanalogies with paradigmatic cases of perception can be overcome. Finally, I considered the objection that the current proposal cannot account for the emotions of animals and young children and pointed out how careful consideration of the case in fact supports the idea that, at least in mature adults, the high-level perception view is the right one. Despite its initial popularity, the perceptual theory of emotions now seems to be more of a foil for theorists to present their alternative views. The hope of this paper is that this trend would be rectified.[[22]](#footnote-22)

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1. That emotions represent some situation as impinging on one’s concerns may lead to an objection here. It seems unlikely that emotions have a kind of self-reference to the agent that is represented in the *content* of the emotion. Perhaps certain emotions (e.g. pride) might involve some kind of self-reference but it seems implausible that fear of the dog involves representing myself and my bodily integrity in the content of the emotion somehow. However, the self-referential nature of the emotional content is best understood as following from the egocentric, perspectival nature of emotion in a manner analogous to the egocentric nature of perception in general. Perception always presents objects from ‘my point of view’ e.g. that red house is presented as a red house seen from such and such a perspective which I hold. However, that does not mean that *I* am somehow represented in the content of the perception. In the same way, to see the death of my grandfather in terms of an irrevocable loss of something deeply concerning to me does not mean that *I* am somehow represented in the content of the perception, only that it is an irrevocable loss of great value represented from *my* point of view. See (de Sousa 1987; Deonna 2006) for a discussion of the perspectival nature of emotion. I’d like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. What it means for some thought to be conceptual or non-conceptual is a thorny issue. Tappolet frames the distinction in terms of the structure of the content of a certain thought. According to her, “concepts can be defined as inferentially relevant constituents of content” (2016: 17) – i.e. they are structured in a manner that allows for inferential connections between different thoughts. In my view, the best way to understand what it is for some thought to have content structured in this manner is for the thought to satisfy Evans’ generality constraint: “If a subject can be credited with the thought that a is F then he must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that a is G, of every property of being G of which he has a conception.” (Evans, 1982: 104) Conceptual thought thus implies systemically recombinable representational ability. See (Camp 2009) for discussion. I’d like to thank Philip Pettit for discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perhaps emotion may differ from paradigmatic cases of perception in its implementation machinery, but this does not obviously mean that it plays a different functional role. This is an important point that is relevant in responding to Mitchell’s (2019) affective representation view. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I’d like to thank two anonymous reviewers for helping me to clarify my epistemological commitments here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See (Silins 2019) for an overview of the literature on perceptual justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Vance (2014) makes a similar point in the context of cognitive penetration of perception and emotion by some other belief, but I believe the point may be generalised to include the developmental etiology of the perception or emotion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. That high-level perception provides immediate justification for high-level contents is also controversial, but see (Silins 2013) for a defence of this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This echoes McDowell’s (1979) point that evaluative perception is available only to the virtuous who have the right kinds of upbringing. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Deonna (2006) makes a similar comparison between emotional disorders and systematic perceptual error. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I’d like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interestingly, Salmela himself points out one exception to this in the case of perceptual facts. This is the case of skilled perception. As he notes (2011: 19), experienced chess players can perceive the implications of moves they could have made and this perception develops only with careful practice. The ordinary folk lack access to these facts. However, it is precisely along the lines of skilled perception that I want to model my perceptual account of emotion. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g. (D’Arms and Jacobson 2006; McDowell 1985; Wiggins 1976) I defend such an account as well in (Yip MS). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The debate on high versus low level perception is one that is carried out within proponents who hold a broadly representational view of perception and the mind. One my wonder what implication there might be for my argument if one adopts an anti-representational view, such as some variety of enactivism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue, but let me make a couple of brief comments here.

    Firstly, note that enactivist accounts have been applied to perception in particular (e.g. Noë, 2005; O’Regan & Noë, 2001). Thus, enactive accounts of perception aim to show that perception is not simply the activation of some internal representation in the brain but is an action of exploring the environment and is thus partly constituted by this interaction. An enactive approach to emotion might suggest something similar for emotion. Thus, for example, Colombetti (2007) argues that emotional appraisals (which I understand in terms of concern-based construal) are not constituted by some internal representation but by some kind of interaction between the brain, body and the environment. Depending on how these claims are fleshed out, an enactivist approach may well provide more reason to suggest that emotion and perception are akin to one another. Secondly, note that at least on Noë’s account of enactive perception, vision is “a mode of exploration of the world that is mediated by knowledge of what we call sensorimotor contingencies” (O’Regan & Noë, 2001: 940). Thus, knowledge of the sensorimotor laws that govern our interaction with objects has to play a role in generating our visual experience of even low-level properties such as shape. The role that such knowledge plays could seem like the kind of ‘informational enrichment’ (See §1.2, 2.2) that has been claimed to be problematic for high-level perception as well as perceptual accounts of the emotion. If Noë is right, then, this is another reason to think that such objections to the perceptual theory are less problematic than it seems.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is of course related to Moore’s Open Question argument. Even if one points to the non-evaluative properties that form the supervening base of some evaluative property, there will always be an open question whether the evaluative property is realised. See (Echeverri 2019) for discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Victoria McGeer and Daniel Stoljar for discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Notice also that this suggests that the idea that emotions are *always* dependent on cognitive bases in personal-level representation is false. One can represent the evaluative property in perception without representing the non-evaluative properties which form its supervening base. To give another example in the emotional case, someone who is unfortunately attuned to the lechery of certain kinds of men might find some person who is overtly respectable disgusting without necessarily being able to pin down why. Presumably, she would be attuned to certain cues in the situation and sub-personally register certain non-evaluative features of the situation, but these non-evaluative features do not appear in the personal-level representation of perception. What *does* appear is the evaluative property of being disgusting. I’d like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It may be helpful here as well to consider that olfactory, gustatory and tactile perception might also occur in the same way. I become aware of the sourness of that fruit by becoming aware of its producing a certain sensation on my tongue, or the roughness of the carpet by becoming aware of its producing a certain sensation on my skin. These are situations where the implementational vehicle appears different from that of visual perception and plausibly one where, to use Mitchell’s language, our being affected in a certain way represents some object as having a certain property. Thanks to Philip Pettit and Colin Klein for pointing this out to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Camp (2009) also argues that some animals can plausibly be credited with conceptual thought by showing how a wide range of animals could be seen to satisfy the generality constraint in their thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See (Nussbaum, 2001: 119-38) for a stirring account in narrative form of the complex emotional life of two dogs. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We may therefore take the point that McDowell (1994) makes in his defence of the conceptuality of perception: “We do not need to say that we have what mere animals have, non-conceptual content, and we have something else as well, since we can conceptualise that content and they cannot. Instead we can say that we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. There is already evidence that some of the more complicated emotions arise only after children have acquired certain conceptual abilities. Thus, the capacity for self-recognition is required for self-conscious emotions such as embarrassment or shame. (See Lewis et al., 1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thanks to Colin Klein, Daniel Stoljar, Justin D’Ambrosio, Philip Pettit, Victoria McGeer and two anonymous referees for reading and providing invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I’d also like to thank the members of the ANU Philosophy of Mind work-in progress group as well as ‘Colin’s Crowd’ for helpful feedback on this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)