Are emotions perceptions of value?

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**Abstract**

A popular idea at present is that emotions are perceptions of values. Most defenders of

this idea have interpreted it as the perceptual thesis that emotions present (rather than

merely represent) evaluative states of affairs in the way sensory experiences present us

with sensible aspects of the world. We argue against the perceptual thesis. We show

that the phenomenology of emotions is compatible with the fact that the evaluative

aspect of apparent emotional contents has been incorporated from outside. We then

deal with the only two views that can make sense of the perceptual thesis. On the

response–dependence view, emotional experiences present evaluative responsedependent

properties (being fearsome, being disgusting, etc.) in the way visual

experiences present response-dependent properties such as colors. On the response–

independence view, emotional experiences present evaluative response-independent

properties (being dangerous, being indigestible, etc.), conceived as ‘Gestalten’

independent of emotional feelings themselves. We show that neither view can make

plausible the idea that emotions present values as such, i.e., in an open and transparent

way. If emotions have apparent evaluative contents, this is in fact due to evaluative

enrichments of the non-evaluative presentational contents of emotions.

**1. Introduction: the direct access thesis**

A popular view at present is that emotions are perceptions of values. At first sight, such a

broad view is difficult to assess because there are numerous potential similarities and

dissimilarities between emotions and perception. The nature of perception and perceptual

experiences is itself a moot question, so which similarities and dissimilarities there are to

uncover will also depend on one’s theoretical stance in this domain.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, we are going to

focus on one specific element of the perceptual analogy, which concerns the content of the

emotions, or what the emotions are intentionally about. The issue we are interested in is

whether emotions can be understood as perceptions whose contents are evaluative.

With regard to this specific issue, most authors have defended what we are going to

call the direct access thesis. According to this thesis emotions give us direct access to

evaluative properties, in the sense that they perceptually present these properties at the

level of their contents. Just as sensory perception is a form of ‘openness’ to the sensible

world (McDowell 1996), emotions should be conceived as instances of openness to values.

For instance, our emotional experience of fear involves the perceptual presentation of the

fact that this dog is dangerous or fearful. D’Arms and Jacobson write, with the declared

intention of reflecting a widely shared opinion: ‘Most recent accounts of the structure of

emotion, despite their differences, agree that emotions (somehow) present the world to us

as having certain value-laden features. Following their lead, we will say that emotions

involve evaluative presentations’ (2000a, 66). Similarly, Tappolet summarizes her view

by saying that ‘[I]n Meinong’s terminology, emotions would present values or at least

some of them’ (2000, 173). Another illustration is Goldie, who claims that ‘[w]hen we

respond emotionally to things in the environment, we also, as part of the same experience,

typically perceive those things as having the emotion-proper property’ (2004, 97), where

the emotion-proper properties (frightening, disgusting, shameful, etc.) are the evaluative

properties proper to each emotion type.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In what follows, we argue against the direct access thesis, and suggest that itmay be more

misleading than beneficial for a proper understanding of the nature of emotions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although

we are not going to discuss the epistemological implications of the direct access thesis, our

criticism should also be relevant to understanding the rationality of the transition from

emotions to evaluative judgments. If emotions are not perceptual presentations of values,

they cannot justify or warrant evaluative judgments in the way, for instance, the visual

perception of a red balloon can justify or warrant the judgment that there is a red balloon.

Our discussion is structured as follows. In the next section, we introduce the notion of

direct access with respect to perception in general. As we understand it, this notion points

to a distinction between what is perceptually presented and what is only represented in our

experience. The significance of the distinction is that our naı¨ve notion of perceptual

content typically incorporates states of affairs which we do not have access to but which

co-vary with our experience in interesting ways. Such incorporation is often implicit, so

we are naturally inclined to self-ascribe perceptual contents that are richer than what is

perceptually presented to us. In arguing against the direct access thesis, we are going to use

that distinction to suggest that the apparent evaluative content of emotion is in fact the

product of an informational enrichment initiated outside emotion. Our emotional

experiences themselves do not present values as such, i.e., in an open and transparent way.

Thus, the distinction between perceptual presentation and representation enables us to

identify what we see as the main challenge faced by proponents of the view that emotions

are perceptions of values; namely, to show that the apparently evaluative content of

emotions has not been enriched from outside, through habits, past experience, general

beliefs or mere associations. Otherwise, their view would entail that emotions do not

perceptually present values as such after all, or that they are not an original source of

experience of evaluative states of affairs.

In our view, there are only two general ways of fleshing out the direct access thesis.

In Section 3, we turn to the first of these ways, which we call the response–dependence

view. This view exploits an analogy between emotions and perceptions of colors, and

relies on the claim that emotions are perceptions of response-dependent evaluative

properties, such as being fearsome or disgusting. Response-dependent properties are

properties whose instantiation constitutively depends on the availability of some cognitive

response, such as a perceptual or an affective experience. However, we shall argue that the

response–dependence view eventually prevents the proponents of the direct access thesis

from explaining the properly evaluative character of the response-dependent properties

that are supposed to be perceptually presented through emotions. Section 4 is about the second way of understanding the direct access thesis, which we call the response–independence view. This view construes the evaluative content of the emotion as a further Gestalt pertaining to the object of the emotion. As this Gestalt is supposed to be presented independently of the feelings that are part of the emotional experience, it can be conceived as response-independent, like the property of being dangerous or indigestible. As we show, though, the connection between emotions and response-independent values is far from being transparent to the naı¨ve subject, and often can be made only quite indirectly. Emotions themselves do not perceptually present response-independent values at all; the subject can be aware of those only through other, independent mental states.

In a nutshell, the direct access thesis cannot be maintained, and we are left at best with

the claim that emotions are perceptual representations of values, as the result of

incorporating into emotional content evaluative material coming from outside the sphere

of our emotional experience.

**2. The direct access thesis: preliminary distinctions**

**2.1 Direct vs reliability-based access**

As mentioned above, our target in this paper is the direct access thesis, according to which

emotions are, or involve, perceptual experiences that present values to us, i.e., that reveal

them to us openly and transparently. In short, emotions give us direct access to values as

such. Some philosophers might reject the direct access thesis and nevertheless insist that

emotions are perceptions of values, i.e., that the latter can figure in the contents of

emotional experiences. This is a coherent option only if we can perceive more than what

we have direct access to in our perceptual experience.

Consider Prinz’s neo-Jamesian view. On this view, emotions are direct perceptions of

characteristic bodily changes (Prinz 2004; see also 2007). However, Prinz also suggests

that emotions are reliable indicators of what he calls ‘concerns’, namely specific

organism–environment relations that bear on well-being, such as dangers, losses or

offenses.[[4]](#footnote-4) Concerns are value-laden, but they are ontologically independent of the

emotions they cause in us. Here, Prinz avails himself of Dretske’s consumerist semantics

according to which, roughly, reliable internal indicators of X can become genuine

representations of X, to be used in practical and theoretical reasoning. In particular,

emotions can become genuine representations of concerns within the relevant cognitive

system.

Initially, Prinz (2004 see 60 and 68) has been careful not to claim that emotions are

perceptual experiences of concerns, even if the former represent the latter. What we

perceive through emotions are only value-free bodily changes. This is consistent with the

general claim that what we perceive is exhausted by what we have direct access to in our

perceptual experience.

Later on, though, Prinz (2006a, see 146 and 158) argues that the way emotions

represent concerns makes them genuine perceptions of concerns.[[5]](#footnote-5) Prinz’s later theory

makes sense in the context of a reliabilist conception of perception. On this conception, we

can perceive states of affairs that are not openly and transparently given to us, under two

main conditions: first, our experiences co-vary reliably with these states, and second, such

co-variation can be exploited by our cognitive system, which thus should be able

to represent the relevant states independently of our experiences.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the case in point,

emotions would be directly only about mere bodily changes, but their contents could reach

to, i.e., represent, concerns, even though the latter are not given openly and transparently

to us in our emotional experience. Thus, emotions represent values only because the

latter can be independently represented and at least implicitly understood as what the

former co-vary with.

**2.2 What is seen: presented content and beyond**

The reliabilist conception of perception trades on the distinction between perceptually

presenting and representing the world.[[7]](#footnote-7) In order to get a better grip on this distinction, let

us examine two intuitive descriptions of perceptual situations outside the sphere of

emotions:

*The dispute.*

Pierre visits his friends Marie and Jacques and sees that they have just had an issue, by seeing pieces of broken plates scattered all around the kitchen floor.

*The hot plate.*

Pierre sees that the cooking plate is hot, by seeing that it is reddening.

In both cases, one can argue that what Pierre has perceived goes beyond what is

properly presented in his perceptual experiences. Pierre is visually presented with broken

plates on the kitchen floor, but not with the dispute itself. He is visually presented with the

color of the cooking plate, but not its temperature (which is not a proper object of vision).

Now the recent dispute and the temperature of the cooking plate are states of affairs

that are (more or less) reliably connected to Pierre’s perceptual experiences. Moreover, a

cognitive system can recruit these experiences as representations of these states since it is

part of Pierre’s background knowledge of the world that broken plates (red cooking plates)

often indicate an issue (hot cooking plates). To this extent, Pierre’s visual experiences

represent the dispute and a hot cooking plate.

Of course, the distinction between what is presented and what is merely represented in

our perceptual experience is hostage to a substantial theory of perception, which we cannot

provide here. Our remarks about these examples are offered simply as possible (and

hopefully plausible) illustrations of this distinction. The important point to notice at this

stage is that we are usually immediately aware of what our perceptual experiences

represent, even when the latter is not perceptually presented. This is why we are prone to

make rather generous self-ascriptions of experiences. Indeed, Pierre might spontaneously

report having seen that Marie and Jacques had just had an issue and that the cooking plate

was hot. We tend to conceive of ‘what we perceive’ in a broad way, encompassing

contents that we are immediately aware of even though we do not experience them openly

and transparently.

**2.3 Informational enrichment**

What the foregoing discussion shows is that it is of crucial importance to distinguish

between what is perceptually presented and what may appear as perceptually presented

but is in reality only represented. Let us say that the presented content of an experience is

the state of affairs that the experience itself discloses to the subject independently of

further cognitive processing (such as judgments or inclinations to judge on the basis of the

experience). However, as a result of this further cognitive processing that may include

informational enrichment, the experience can appear to present further states of affairs

although it only represents them. For instance, Pierre’s past acquaintance with his friends’

manners, as well as repeated experiences of the correlation between the redness and the

hotness of cooking plates have enabled apparent perceptual contents that are richer than

what is presented in his current perceptual experience.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When a philosopher says that emotions are perceptions of values, it is crucial to

ascertain whether she means that values are presented or merely represented in our

emotional experiences. The problem is that such a philosopher often relies on our naïve

theory of perception which, as we saw, does not really distinguish between perceptual

presentation and representation made conscious through enrichment. The really

interesting locus of debate resolves around the direct access thesis, i.e., whether emotions

involve perceptual presentations of values. For if values are merely represented in our

emotional experiences, the apparent evaluative contents of the latter must have been enriched from outside. That is, if emotions themselves cannot be seen as cases of openness

to values, the fact that they represent values must be explained by reference to nonemotional

states.

In other words, the neglect of the distinction between perceptual presentation and

representation can lead to a trivialization of the claim that values are perceivable. Consider

another intuitive description of a perceptual situation:

*The Stop sign.*

While driving, Pierre sees that he ought to stop his car before proceeding, by

seeing the Stop sign in front of him.

This description entails that what Pierre sees is a normative state of affairs (that I ought

to stop my car). But this content obviously goes beyond what is visually presented to him,

namely a particular traffic sign. Since Pierre is an experienced driver, he does not need to

infer the judgment that he ought to stop his car from independent premises. Rather, he is

immediately aware of the relevant normative state of affairs. Although Pierre’s visual

experience represents this state of affairs, it is obvious that he has no direct perceptual

access to it. Otherwise, it would be too easy a way to prove that we can perceive norms or

values. Even if the representational content of the driver’s perceptual experience involves

a normative state of affairs, it is clearly the product of some form of external informational

enrichment. The normative material does not come from the experience itself, but has been

brought in by background beliefs or cognitive habits.

In what follows, we shall discuss the only two ways in which the direct access thesis

may be fleshed out. Indeed, the value properties presented in the emotional content may be

either response-dependent or response-independent. On the first option, the presentation of

evaluative properties is often described by analogy with the perception of colors when

colors are themselves conceived as response-dependent properties. Since the experience as

of something red ordinarily is the perception of a red object, it is suggested that the

experience of fear in the presence of a barking dog ordinarily is a perception of the barking

dog as fearsome. On this option, the evaluative content of the emotion (fearsome) is

presented under the guise of the emotional experience itself (fear). By contrast, the second

option claims that the emotional presentation of values must be understood as the

perception of response-independent properties. The distinctive point of this second option

is that, when an object is seen as presenting a certain response-independent property, the

ontology of the property presented in perception does not depend essentially on the

experience of this very property. Transposed to the case of emotions, the idea would be

that the evaluative properties presented in emotions are essentially independent from the

experiential, feeling-like dimension of emotions. For instance, it would be part of an

experience of fear that its object is seen as dangerous although this further way in which

the object of the emotion is presented does not rely at all on the feelings inherent in our

experience of fear.

**3. The response–dependence view**

Let us start with the response–dependence view. The first step toward such a view is

to notice after Wiggins that there are pairs of emotions and values that strike us

as being ‘made for one another’ (1987, 199). This is true of fear and fearsome, disgust

and disgusting, amusement and amusing, admiration and admirable, among others.

Building on this undisputable fact, it is natural to suggest that in certain circumstances,

being an object of admiration contributes to the object being admirable and thus that

they are secondary properties.[[9]](#footnote-9) The next step is then to follow McDowell, who

famously suggested that if values are secondary qualities, then it is possible to perceive

these qualities themselves. This is possible because ‘[s]econdary-quality experience

presents itself as perceptual awareness of properties genuinely possessed by the

objects that confront one’ (1985, reprinted in 1998, 134). The final step, in line with

some suggestions of McDowell himself, is to apply this account of the perception of

value to emotions. Indeed, the pairs of emotions and values that we listed above make

it tempting to hypothesize that when we are afraid of a given object, the experience of

fear presents the object as being fearsome, that when we are amused, the experience of

amusement presents its object as being amusing, etc. In other words, if the experience

of red that we have when seeing an object is a perception of an object as being red, why

not say that an experience of fear in front of an object is a perception of this object as

being fearsome? Similarly, an emotion of disgust toward a corpse in decay would be a

perception of the disgustingness of the corpse in decay, etc. In each case, the emotional

experience would count as a perception unless it is defeated. This is the view that

D’Arms and Jacobson have argued for, in so far as they qualify their sentimentalist

theory as a form of perceptivism which is understood on the model of the perception of

colors themselves conceived as secondary properties (2005, 190).[[10]](#footnote-10) In what follows,

we shall refer to the color model as the model that explains how emotions are

perceptions of response-dependent evaluative properties by relying on the perception

of colors. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, if one wants to earn the right to rely on

the color model in order to explain how emotions present response-dependent values,

two points need to be secured. First, emotional experiences must present values just as

visual experiences of red present redness. In other words, the evaluative intentional

content of emotions must be presented through our emotional feelings, under the guise

of the emotional experience. Second, the value properties that are presented in

emotions must be response-dependent. In fact, D’Arms and Jacobson are keen on

saying that since ‘greenness is essentially a matter of how things appear visually’, ‘the

same goes for value’ (2005, 189). Therefore, the evaluative properties that are

presented ‘are inevitably response-dependent’, which means that emotions ‘purport to

be perceptions of such properties as the funny, the shameful, the fearsome, the pitiable,

etc.’ (2000a, 66). Insofar as Tappolet (2011) is perfectly clear that the presented

content of emotions is non-conceptual but conceptualized with response-dependent

concepts, she may be understood as adopting the color model.[[11]](#footnote-11) As we will argue, the

major difficulty for the defender of the response-dependent view is to secure both these

points.

**3.1 The gap between dispositions and values**

The problem that we want to raise now is that relying on the color model in fact

undermines the very idea that emotions present values. Indeed, the color model

eventually implies that emotions do not present values. To see this, let us take a closer

look at the case of redness. Although the experience of redness is a subjective response,

we are allowed to say that we perceive the objective redness of objects because redness

is a dispositional property. In other words, it is because redness is defined as the property

we experience as red in normal conditions that we are allowed to say precisely that we

perceive an object as being red in normal conditions. Now, the color model implies that

an experience of fear in front of an object in normal conditions allows us to say that we

perceive the object as fearsome. However, if we follow the color model faithfully, we

must conclude that the property fearsome that is in play here is the dispositional property

of being fearsome, as our experience of red allows us to attribute the dispositional

property of being red. In other words, the color model allows us to say that fear in normal

conditions presents us with objects that trigger or have the disposition to trigger fear, but

nothing beyond that. Therefore, this model leads directly to the conclusion that emotions

are perceptions of dispositional properties such as fearsome, disgusting, amusing, etc.

We have not earned the right to conclude anything stronger and especially not that

emotions are perceptions of the value properties that bear the same name but that are

plainly different.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In relying on the color model, one is therefore led to the following difficulty: one has to explain how emotions can present genuinely evaluative and not merely dispositional

properties. Insofar as the definition of red as a mere dispositional property does not seem

to leave room for any evaluative aspect of this property, the same should go for the

definition of fearsome and disgusting as mere dispositional properties. In a nutshell, the

claim that the properties presented in emotions are evaluative rather than merely

dispositional cannot be motivated by the color model alone.

In fairness to friends of the color model, it is worth emphasizing that our complaint is

not that they have overlooked the fact that evaluative perceptions differ from color

perceptions.13 It is rather that they do not tell us how two types of experiences that are

considered, and indeed seem, analogous – experiences of red and experiences of fear –

present two different types of content: a non-evaluative property in the case of redness and

an evaluative property in the case of fearsome.

**3.2 Is the gap bridgeable?**

The friends of the color model may suggest that we have not paid enough attention to our

emotional experiences and that once we do so, it becomes obvious that our emotions

present an evaluative content through the model’s experiential aspects. After all, it seems

quite intuitive to say that at least sometimes we are directly aware, through our experience

of disgust, that an object is disgusting in the evaluative sense. Yet, it is fair to say that the

defenders of the color model are not very prolix when it comes to explaining in detail how

emotions involve an ‘evaluative presentation’ or ‘present value-laden features’.14 In what

follows, we present the only two options that seem available to them and we try to show

that neither of them is very promising.

On a first option, it might be suggested that the emotional experience itself presents an

evaluative property under the guise of this very emotional experience or an aspect thereof.

Thus, for instance, fear would have an evaluative aspect. But what could it be? The beating

of our hearts and our sweating are no more evaluative than our visual experience of red,

and presumably this is true of all our bodily feelings. Bodily feelings are nothing but

experiences of bodily states. Moreover, we may wonder how even the sum or a

combination of bodily states can have an evaluative aspect. Notice that our argument does

not need to rest on a restricted view of the emotional experience. We can acknowledge,

and it is quite plausible, that when we experience an emotion we are also aware of

motivations or changes in the focus or width of our attention. Nevertheless, being aware

of such motivations or changes in our attention does not involve an evaluation of the object

of the emotion.

In his own attempt to explain the direct access thesis, Goldie claims that an emotion

involves a ‘feeling towards’ that is a mental feeling directed toward the object of the

emotion. In addition, he claims that ‘when we respond emotionally to things in the

environment, we also, as part of the same experience, typically perceive those things as

having the emotion-proper property.’ (2004, 97). These emotion-proper properties are the

response-dependent evaluative properties listed above: fearsome, disgusting, shameful

and the like. Thus, putting these claims together, his view is that feelings toward are not

only directed toward the object of our emotions but present the response-dependent

evaluative property specific to each emotion.

With regard to our specific concern here, one might wonder how mental ‘feelings

toward’ can present evaluative properties. Goldie proposes that ‘for each sort of emotion,

there will be a broadly characteristic qualitative nature of these feelings’ (2000, 19). It is

hard to understand, though, how these qualitative feelings could present something

evaluative. In general, we have no idea of qualitative experiences presenting evaluative

properties. Experiences of colors, sounds, headaches, even possible mental experiences

such as the experience of the fluency of a mental process, etc., are evaluatively neutral.

Therefore, the notion of an evaluative feeling might well be an oxymoron.

At this point, one might want to resist this conclusion by pointing to the fact that most

emotions, if not all, are themselves pleasant or unpleasant. Could we not suggest that our

emotional experiences in being pleasant or unpleasant present their object as being good or

bad in some way or other?15 Perhaps the unpleasantness of shame presents the responsedependent property shameful and this presentation is evaluative since shame is itself

unpleasant and thus is able to present the object of shame as having a negative value.

Indeed, it seems that, in some sense, the object of our emotion is unpleasant in a way

characteristic of the experience of shame. However, this is still insufficient for the object

of the emotion to be presented as having value. For sure, we may say that the object of our

shame is presented as being unpleasant, but this will again be what we may call a

dispositional sense of ‘unpleasant’. What we will be saying is that in normal conditions

this object is experienced as somehow unpleasant. It does not follow that this unpleasant

experience is the correct or appropriate experience to have. And this is very bad news for

the color model since it shows that even if the emotional experience is itself intrinsically

valuable and somehow presents the object as having this value, it appears in reality that the

intrinsically valuable aspect of an emotion at best presents its object as having a merely

dispositional property.

A second option that could attract the friend of the color model would be to claim that

our emotional experience presents itself as an appropriate response to its object.16 In other

words, emotions would present the property of appropriateness. For instance, an

experience of fear in the presence of a barking dog would present itself as appropriate or

required. But then, if for the sake of the argument we identify evaluative properties such as

being fearsome with the (possibly) deontic one being such that fear is appropriate, as

proponents of the Fitting Attitude Analysis of value have suggested, then it would be

possible to argue that emotions present values.17 Indeed, given the identification just

proposed, if an emotion of fear presents itself as being appropriate, then this fear is thereby

presenting the property fearsome.

Unfortunately, this second option does not fare better because it rests on a wildly

implausible description of our emotions. It is hard to believe that our emotions reflexively

present themselves as being appropriate. Rather, our common experience seems to be that

the content of an emotion does not refer to the emotion itself, let alone its appropriateness.

Once again, if we follow the analogy with color, the appropriateness of seeing something

as red is not part of the perceptual experience of red objects. Similarly, it is no part of the

content of an emotion that this same emotion is appropriate.

Our assessment of the two options available within the color model allows us to see

why the proposal put forward by Deonna (2006) is also defective. His specific suggestion

is that emotions present their objects as ‘calling for a certain behavior’ or ‘as calls for

action’ (2006, 34). Thus, for instance, ‘the fear experienced when facing a lion is

representing the lion as calling for one’s flight (or one’s freezing or one’s singing a tune,

etc.)’ (2006, 34). This is a version of the color model because Deonna claims that the

object of an emotion calling for an action is presented in the bodily experience that is part

of the emotion: ‘The phenomenology of the body characteristic of the emotional

experience is what presents the axiological properties of the environment’ (Deonna and

Teroni 2008, 80).

In our view, this proposal trades on an ambiguity with regard to the notion of ‘calling’.

On the one hand, if the call is understood non-normatively as a motivation or as a bodily

preparedness toward action, then the proposal is extremely plausible but it fails to explain

in what sense emotions present an evaluative or deontic property. Thus, it is subject to the

objection raised against the first option available to defenders of the color model. On the

other hand, if the call is understood normatively as expressing that a motivation is

somehow appropriate or required, then it falls prey to the objections raised two paragraphs

above against the second option. Therefore, the proposal fails either way to explain how

emotions could present values.18

**3.3 Enriched contents**

The reader who has followed us so far might still wonder at this point: But why is it so

tempting to think that emotions present response-dependent values? Our response is that

although emotions have no response-dependent evaluative presented content, they appear

to have one because their non-evaluative presented content has been evaluatively

enriched. Moreover, this enrichment need not be acknowledged by the subject herself.

It may in some cases derive from the implicit belief that the object of the emotion makes

this emotion appropriate. Therefore, we not only experience the object as triggering our

emotion, but also that our emotional response is appropriate, and this is nothing else than

to immediately represent the object as having the corresponding response-dependent

evaluative property. In some cases, this belief will refer to response-independent

properties. For instance, in the case of fear, whether the situation is really dangerous from

the subject’s point of view will be relevant to the appropriateness of the subject’s emotion.

The content of the emotion is non-evaluative, yet, since the object is perceived as

dangerous independently of the emotion, we experience our emotion as an appropriate

fear, and therefore experience its object as being fearsome. Somehow, 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.

In other cases, objective criteria of appropriateness are much less obvious.

For instance, the appropriateness of amusement may not rely only on purely response-independent properties of the object of amusement. But this does not mean that we do not

consider either implicitly or explicitly that our laughter is appropriate only in response to

certain objects. For example, one may despise uneducated jokes or racist jokes and value

other kinds of joke. Alternatively, one may believe that the jokes that are really funny are

the less educated, or the more primitive, whatever those might be. Even if one has no view

at all on the topic, one is certainly naturally disposed to consider whether one’s emotions

are appropriate. Therefore, one’s laughter may come with the impression that it is

appropriate or not. And this, in other words, explains why we experience the object of

one’s laughter as value-laden. However, this apparent evaluative content is only an

enrichment of the emotional content supported by considerations that are extraneous to the

emotion itself. In short, in denying that emotions have response-dependent evaluative

content, we are not left unable to explain how our emotions can appear to have such

evaluative content.

We therefore have to conclude that the perception of color, at least as a response-dependent property, is unable to provide a plausible framework to understand how

emotions give us a direct access to values. Since our emotional experience does not seem

to present response-dependent values, the direct access view has to be defended on other

grounds. We need to ask ourselves whether emotions may somehow present response-independent values.

**4. The response–independence view**

On the response–independence view, emotions give us direct perceptual access to

response-independent values. The properties that are perceived in fear, sadness, disgust or

amusement are danger, loss, indigestible, incongruous. These properties are response-independent because, as Prinz (2004, 63–64) has rightly insisted, their very existence does

not rest on our dispositions to experience fear, sadness, disgust or amusement. Something

is dangerous if and only if it threatens someone’s bodily integrity or welfare. Similarly,

even if the possibility of a loss requires that someone care about something, the ability to

experience sadness is not required for there to be losses. Admittedly, danger and loss are

relational properties as far as something may be a danger for one individual but not for

another, or for one species and not for another. However, this has no implication for the

fact that the very existence of these values does not rest on our responses.

Now, how could emotions present us their object as having response-independent

properties? For this to be possible, the response-independent property must be

ontologically independent from the experiential aspects of emotion. In other words,

these response-independent values must present themselves just as if they were

independent of emotional experience; they must present themselves as primary qualities

like shape or size.19 If this is correct, then the most plausible model for such a presentation

of response-independent values would be that emotions present us their object as having a

value property as a further Gestalt or construal imposed on their object. Although Roberts

(2003) does not claim that emotions are perceptions of response-independent values in the

direct access sense,20 one may at least build such an account from his suggestion that each

type of emotion construes its object as having a specific response-independent value.

Indeed, he further explains the notion of ‘construal’ as follows:

a construal is not an interpretation laid over a neutrally perceived object, but a characterization of the object, a way the object presents itself. When one see a duck-rabbit as a duck, the figure itself takes on a ducky look. (2003, 80)

Thus, relying on what we may call the Gestalt model, the proposal would be that

emotions are perceptions of values because the object of an emotion is always further seen

or construed as having an evaluative property. Do¨ring may be seen as defending this view

insofar as she writes: ‘In fearing a snake that you suddenly encounter on a woodland path it

seems to you that the snake is dangerous’ (2007, 378).21 Although Tye’s account is more

complex, he is committed to the response–independence view. Moreover, he seems to

accept the Gestalt model insofar as the bodily response that is part of an emotion does not

present the evaluative property that is attributed to the object of the emotion but is a

distinct part of what the emotion represents:emotional experiences are experiences directed upon items that are typically external to the body and that represent those items 1) as having an evaluative feature (for example, as being threatening or dangerous) and 2) as causing (or, in some cases, as merely being accompanied by), a certain broadly distribute, internal bodily disturbance (2008, 35).

**4.1 Appraisal theories and the non-transparency objection**

Before raising our objections to the response–independence view, we want to emphasize

that it is not our aim to deny that emotions may involve or result from an appraisal of our

environment.22 In fact, the case in favor of appraisal theories of emotions is quite powerful

and we do not want our objection to rely on the rejection of these theories.23 The objection

that we want to raise has a different starting point. Recall that the fate of the Gestalt model

rests on two theses. First, it must be shown that emotions always involve an evaluative

construal of their object in terms of response-independent values. Second, one must make

sure that these construals are really part of our emotions themselves. With regard to the

first point, it is important to emphasize that, if emotions encompass cognitive appraisals, it

does not immediately follow that these appraisals are available under the guise of an

evaluative construal of their objects to those who experience these emotions. We must

distinguish between the fact that emotions involve an appraisal of their objects and the

awareness that the individuals experiencing these emotions may have of this appraisal.

The cognitive appraisal underlying emotions may not be transparent to the subject.

Let us then turn to the question of whether emotions present response-independent

evaluative properties. To assess this point we may wonder whether the layperson is able to

specify the response-independent evaluative properties characteristic of each emotion and

of which she is supposed to be aware. If she is unable to do it, then it will certainly be a

strong clue that in reality no such evaluative properties are presented through our

emotions. Within this context, the example that is systematically put forward is fear and,

indeed, fear seems to present its object as dangerous. But let us consider other emotions.

What about amusement? Is the layman able to tell which evaluative property is presented

in our laughter? The sensible response is certainly negative. An often-cited candidate for

being the general feature that triggers our laughter is incongruity, but it is doubtful that our

laughter presents its object as being incongruous. Moreover, as it has often been argued,

there are numerous forms of incongruity and it is clear that not every incongruence is

amusing. But we are unable to tell what sort of incongruity is relevant except by saying

that it is the kind of incongruity that amuses us. The same goes for the value supposedly

presented by disgust. The idea that disgust is an appropriate response to things that may be

indigestible or somehow dangerous for our health is also the result of empirical

knowledge. It is certainly not a value that is presented in our experience of disgust itself.

Therefore, the mere fact that the evaluative features that are supposed to be presented in

our emotional experiences are not obvious to us is the best evidence that we are not aware

of any evaluation of the objects of our environment through our emotions.

In addition, both philosophers and psychologists disagree about the response-independent values that are correlated to each type of emotion. The wide disagreement

among appraisal theorists about the proper pattern of appraisal specific to each emotion is

in and of itself evidence that there are no response-independent evaluative properties that

we all ‘see’ as belonging to the objects of our emotions. It explains why the identification

of the pattern of appraisal that corresponds to each emotion is an empirical program.

A final piece of evidence is that the evaluative concepts that figure in emotion-based

judgments are much more frequently concepts of response-dependent values. The only

indisputable example of a response-independent concept is danger. In comparison, the

class of response-dependent concepts that are involved in emotion-based evaluative

judgments is much larger. In this second class, we have at least disgusting, frightening,

amusing, shameful, embarrassing, despicable, sad and admirable. Why is this so? Once

again, we believe that the best explanation is that we use response-dependent evaluative

concepts much more frequently precisely because the content of our emotions does not

present response-independent evaluative properties. If they were presenting such

properties, we would presumably use concepts that refer to the response-independent

values.

All these objections against the response-independent view and the Gestalt model

might still be avoided if the experiential aspects of emotions were presenting response-independent values, for our use of response-dependent concepts would not come as an

objection. In Section 3 above, we discussed and rejected the color model, according to

which emotions are presentations of response-dependent evaluative properties just as

visual experiences are presentations of response-dependent color properties. Now some

philosophers have conceived color as a response-independent property.24 Can this

alternative view of color be used as an analogy to support the claim that emotions are

presentations of response-independent evaluative properties? We doubt it. Suppose that

the response-independent property with which color is identified is a reflectance property

of the surfaces of the material things. To begin with, it is not clear that reflectance

properties (or for that matter any microphysical properties) are really presented through

our chromatic experiences, rather than merely represented. It is certainly not transparent to

the naı¨ve subject that the redness of the table that she sees is a specific reflectance property.

This version of the new analogy is thus of no help to the friends of the direct access view.

Just as the naı¨ve subject needs some additional information to the effect that her chromatic

experiences track reflectance properties, emotions can become perceptions of values only

through some kind of informational enrichment of the non-evaluative states of affairs that

they present to the subject.

A more sophisticated suggestion is that we can perceive response-independent

properties in a response-dependent way, i.e., via some response-dependent mode of

presentation (whether conceptual or not). Indeed, some philosophers have drawn a

distinction between response–dependence or response–independence as applied to

properties, and response–dependence or response–independence as applied to concepts

(or to non-conceptual modes of presentation) (Pettit 1991). For instance, a visual

experience of the redness of the table would be the perception of a specific reflectance

property, which is response-independent, via some response-dependent mode of

presentation. Analogously, emotions would be perceptions of response-independent

values via response-dependent affective modes of presentation. In our view, though, the

claim that a response-independent property is perceived in a response-dependent way can

only mean one of two things. On the one hand, one assumes that the relevant response-independent property (reflectance properties, danger) is presented in a responseindependent

way, in order for it to be additionally presented as causing a specific response

(a red experience, fear). It is only on this assumption that one can motivate the view that a

response-independent property is perceptually presented to the subject. On the other hand,

one acknowledges that only response-dependent properties are perceptually presented, but

that the relevant response-independent properties are merely perceptually represented.

In the case of emotion, the former option has been discarded in this section, whereas the

second option boils down to the original color model, as discussed and rejected in the

previous section.

**4.2 Evaluative enrichment again**

Even if one is convinced by the above argumentation, one may still wonder why it seems

to us that disgust presents its object as being indigestible or at least that fear presents its

object as being dangerous? Well, in the case of disgust the need for some informational

enrichment is fairly obvious. Are we aware of our appraising the oysters that are now

provoking our disgust as ‘an indigestible object or idea’ (Lazarus 1991, 122) because this

is how the oysters are perceived when they disgust us? This is not very plausible,

especially because not every disgusting object is indigestible. In what sense can a moral

wrong be indigestible? A more plausible explanation of our ‘perceiving’ these oysters as

indigestible is instead that we have two reactions when confronted with oysters. On one

hand, we are disgusted by the oysters, but on the other hand their presence, our disgust, or

both remind us that they might make us sick, as we were last week. Thus, even if we are

having an experience of disgust that makes us immediately aware of their being

indigestible, the evaluation of the oysters is not part of the emotion itself because it is not

presented through our emotional experience. Rather, the value that is represented is an

immediate consequence of the emotion or of the visual presentation of the oysters and their

being associated with indigestibility. Nevertheless, since the object of our disgust is

immediately represented as being indigestible, we may say in a loose sense that we

perceive the indigestibility of oysters.25

Similar explanations apply to the case of fear. The difference between fear and disgust

may be that we do not need to rely on a general belief to construe the object of fear as

dangerous. After all, to perceive that a barking dog is dangerous, we do not need to

experience any emotion; this is simply something that is perceived independently of any

emotion, as we have already suggested. Alston (1967, 485) made this point a long time

ago: ‘two people can see a snake as equally dangerous . . . and yet one is gripped with fear

while the other is calm.’ Thus, although we have a unified experience of fear toward a

dangerous barking dog, we claim that the best explanation of this experience is that it is in

fact the co-occurrence of two independent psychological mental states: on the one hand a

perception – as ordinarily understood – of a barking dog as dangerous, and on the other

hand the fear of this same barking dog.

To sum up, evaluative enrichment of the contents of our emotions can come from

concurrent perceptual states, including those that constitute the emotions’ so-called

‘cognitive bases’26, or from more or less robust associations with general beliefs acquired

through various habits and past experiences. The most important point that we want to

emphasize here is that such enrichment processes are compatible with the spontaneity of

our evaluative judgments. That is, the subject is not conscious of inferring evaluative

judgments on the basis of her emotions. The relevant heuristics are triggered by emotional

and perceptual stimuli in such a way that the emotion itself can seem to have an evaluative

content independently of the actual formation of the corresponding judgment. In other

words, we suggest that some emotions (wrongly) seem to be perceptions of values because

we are immediately aware that they represent value properties and because we take this

immediate awareness for a presentation. As we already have shown, such a conflation is

paradigmatically instantiated by the Stop sign. We are just seeing the Stop sign, but

because the link between Stop signs and what we should do as cautious drivers is deeply

entrenched in our knowledge and behavior, we are immediately aware that we should stop

our car. Therefore, it is no surprise that the value associated with an emotion type comes

immediately to mind as soon as we have an emotion of that type.

We suggest therefore that the value attributed to the object of an emotion is never part

of its presented content. Even if we are immediately aware of an evaluative content when

we have an emotion, it is either because we perceive the value independently of our

emotion as in the case of danger, or because there is an acquired heuristic or cognitive

habit that enriches the non-evaluative content of the emotion. In this last case, the acquired

heuristic or cognitive habit is the result of our past experiences from which we have

learned that a type of emotion represents a certain response-independent value.

**5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the prospects of what we have called ‘the direct access

thesis’, namely the thesis that emotions are perceptions of values in the sense that they

present an evaluative content, and therefore values. Our main conclusion is that the

prospects for a defence of the direct access thesis are dim. There are strong reasons to

believe that emotions are not cases of openness to values, whether the latter are construed

as response-dependent or response-independent properties. Although this conclusion is

compatible with the existence of interesting analogies between emotions and perceptions,

it certainly prevents any epistemologically relevant assimilation of the former to the latter.

Beyond this negative conclusion, we have positively emphasized various ways in

which the apparent content of emotions can be enriched in such a way that it seems to be

evaluative. Explicit and implicit beliefs, cognitive habits, past experience and associations

can add evaluative materials to the value-free contents of our emotional experiences.

Different types of enrichment process are appropriate for different emotions, and only a

detailed account of each emotion and its appropriateness will allow us to definitively resist

the initial attractions of the direct access thesis.

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Notes

13. See, e.g., McDowell (1998, 143), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000b, 726–727; 2005, 189),

Tappolet (2000, 52).

14. Both expressions have several occurrences in D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a, 66–67).

Interestingly, these expressions have disappeared in their 2005 although they explain at great

length why emotions are perceptions of values. In so far as they insist in the latter paper (see its

section 4) on the distinction between the normal conditions that allow us to attribute a

dispositional property and the conditions in which an object merits an experience of fear, one

may conjecture that they have sensed that what enables the ascription of an evaluative property

is in fact not presented in the experience itself but in the wider conditions in which the emotion

is experienced. As we will see later, to adopt this view is to renounce the direct access thesis.

See especially our Section 3.3.

15. We are here grateful to a reviewer for raising this possibility.

16. We take this suggestion from Goldie (2004, 97) although he himself rejects it.

17. The Fitting Attitude Analysis of value goes back to Brentano (1969) but has recently

undergone a strong revival, thanks especially to Scanlon (1999). Defenders of the Fitting

Attitude Analysis of value diverge on the normative concept that must appear in the analysis.

Although D’Arms and Jacobson and Tappolet use ‘appropriate’, others prefer for example

‘required’. Beyond this first debate, most of these authors consider that the relevant concept

must be normative whereas Tappolet (2011) argues in favor of a non-normative reading of

‘appropriate’. These debates have little bearing on what is at stake here. The objection that we

raise in the next paragraph would apply mutatis mutandis for any such analysis of values.

18. It is worth noting that more recently, Deonna and Teroni (2012) have moved away from the direct access thesis.

19. Or indeed color, if it is conceived as a response-independent property; see Section 4.1 below.

20. Indeed, one might argue that the Gestalt imposed on the object of our emotions is not part of the content of emotion but results from further judgments about this content.

21. In fact, we do not know whether she really endorses this view for she insists in other places that the bodily experience must contribute to the evaluative content of emotions. By the way, it is quite telling that she acknowledges that she is unsure whether the value presented in fear is ‘fearsome or danger’ (2007, 374).

22. This is the main tenet of the so-called appraisal theory of emotions which dominates the

psychological research on emotion (Lazarus 1991; Frijda 1986; Scherer et al. 2001).

23. Neither do we want to commit ourselves to the appraisal theory of emotions. As we hope to have made evident, we are only considering to what extent the acceptance of the appraisal

theory may help the friend of the direct access thesis.

24. This might be Tappolet’s current view (personal communication).

25. We therefore agree with Brady (2010, especially 126–127) that the attribution of response-independent values to the objects of our emotions depends on a capacity to recognize these values that is independent of our emotions.

26. The cognitive state, whether it is a perception, an imagination, a thought or a belief, that is

responsible for triggering an emotion is often called its cognitive basis; see Teroni (2007).

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1. For a thorough discussion of potential similarities and dissimilarities, see Salmela (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This view is also clearly held by Deonna (2006), De Sousa (2002), Döring (2007) and Tye

   (2008). Wiggins (1987) and McDowell (1985) come close to this view but Wiggins does not

   state it explicitly and McDowell insists that the idea should only be taken metaphorically.

   Johnston (2001) suggests that affectivity involves the presentation of values but curiously and, we may suppose, intentionally, he does not apply this suggestion to emotions. Mulligan (1998) defends the view that emotions justify evaluative beliefs, but he does not go as far as claiming that emotions are perceptions of values. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whiting (2012) also argues against (what we call here) the direct access thesis. Although most of our objections are rather different, it is interesting to notice that, on certain specific points, our own objections may be seen as furthering or complementing his criticism from a different angle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In his book (2004), Prinz uses the expression ‘core relational themes’, which he borrows from Lazarus, as the generic expression referring to non-response-dependent evaluative properties such as danger, loss, etc. However, ‘core relational themes’ is replaced by ‘concerns’ in his (2006a) paper. For simplicity, we stick with the second expression in our discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Furthermore, he no longer insists that emotions are perceptions of patterned changes in the

   body, but says that the former merely ‘register’ the latter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, he endorses in his (2006b) a very liberal form of reliabilism about perception. For

   instance, he allows for the visual perception of raised hands to represent the property of being a philosophy major, in a context in which you have told your students to raise their hands if they are philosophy majors. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In using this terminology, we do not mean that perceptual presentations are not also perceptual representations. The important point is that what is perceptually represented need not be perceptually presented. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Again, these examples are offered only as possible illustrations of the conceptual distinction between presentational and representational contents. What is actually perceptually presented in our sensory experiences is at least partly an empirical matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although Wiggins himself does not make this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although they have insisted that ‘talk of the perception of value should be taken

    metaphorically’ (2005, 187) or that the ‘analogy’ is ‘imperfect’ (2000a, 67), it is important to

    notice that these ways of downplaying the idea that emotions are perceptions of value do not

    concern the crucial point on which our paper focuses. Essentially, the point of these restrictions is to emphasize the ‘persistence of disagreement’ (2005), the ‘lack of dedicated emotional organs’, and the fact that ‘one need not be in the presence of the object of one’s occurrent emotions’ (2000a, 67). Considered as such these points are objections to a complete analogy between emotions and ordinary perceptions. However, these disanalogies do not bear on the more specific thesis that emotions present values like visual experiences present colors. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See our Section 4.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In fact, it is still possible for the defender of the response–dependence view to insist that the value property fearsome is nothing other than the dispositional property of triggering fear in

    normal conditions. Indeed, this dispositional view definitely implies that we have a direct

    access to value properties as we have direct access to colors. Nevertheless, the dispositional

    view is now widely considered as mistaken (e.g., McDowell 1985; Wiggins 1987; D’Arms and Jacobson 2005; Tappolet 2000), precisely because it does not account for the normativity of a

    value property such as fearsome, which merits fear, or makes fear correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)