

Emotions, Perception, and Moral Judgments

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Introduction

The Question:

How do we know about such things as injustice, or silliness, or saintliness?

We can know what red is by seeing it, and what an F major triad is by hearing it, and by sniffing it what the Notre Dame campus smells like when the ethanol factory is cranked up.

Is there such a thing as perceiving injustice, or silliness, or saintliness?

Are emotions a kind of eye or ear or nose for these qualities?

Can emotions be sources of moral knowledge?

I'm going to try to convince you that emotions can function as a basis for moral judgments in much the way visual and auditory perceptions function as a basis for judgments about things that can be seen and heard. The concept *moral* that guides my discussion is very liberal, covering a wide range of evaluations of persons and their conduct (taking 'conduct' to cover not only their actions but also their mental life). The word 'judgment' can have many connotations, in various contexts and to different people, connotations that I'm not suggesting here. Sometimes 'judgment' suggests deliberation, and/or that the gist of a judgment has weight or momentousness. Or it may suggest that it comes from guesswork or the merely individual perspective of the one making the judgment; or maybe epistemic hesitation or humility—or finality and irrevocability, or self-righteousness on the part of the one making the judgment. As I use the word 'judgment' in this talk, it simply means an episode of belief: if I consider whether this room has carpet, and form the belief that it does (or doesn't), then I have made a judgment in this merely philosophical sense. So my thesis is that a role that emotions can play in the formation of episodic moral beliefs bears a strong analogy to the role that visual and auditory experiences often play in the formation of episodic visual and auditory beliefs.

After getting oriented with some examples, I'll discuss first a kind of perception that I call construal. Then I'll turn to emotions, and suggest that they can be fruitfully understood as concern-based construals, which are thus

perceptions of values as possessed by situations. Last I'll examine the possibility that emotions can be a perceptual basis for particular moral judgments.

Some Examples of Moral Judgments

It is plausible to imagine each of the following judgments as having an emotional background:

What the Underground Man did to Liza the prostitute was outrageously unjust.

Upon hearing of, or remembering, what the Underground Man did, I felt **indignant** towards him about it.

Mother Teresa's compassion for the poor and suffering is saintly.

When I consider Mother Teresa's compassionate life's work, I feel **admiration** [or **reverence**] for her and **gratitude** to God for her devotion to Jesus Christ.

Mrs. Bennett's pride in her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she is a rather silly person.

When I hear her going on volubly and proudly about them, immediately after hearing of George's plans for benefiting mankind, I feel a mild **contempt** for Mrs. Bennett [or **embarrassment** on her behalf, or **amusement** at her pride].

Raymond spoke up courageously at the board of directors' meeting.

When I consider what Raymond said, and the hostile reception that he expected from his hearers, I **admire** his character.

Perception

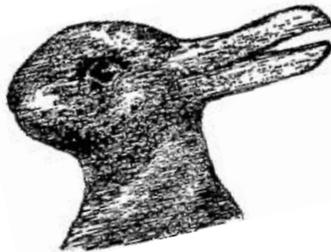
Sensory perception can support judgments in several ways. **FIRST**, I can be told that the double-crested cormorant has a longer gular area than the neotropic cormorant, and once I have learned what the gular area is, I have the wherewithal of a judgment. But I will certainly *understand* this

judgment better if given the opportunity to see examples of the two species side-by-side. **SECOND**, if a reliable cormorant-spotter tells me that the birds on the river behind my house are double-crested cormorants, I still may gain some *justification* for my belief by stepping out back and looking. **THIRD**, even if my reliable informant is so much better than I at spotting these birds that I gain no justification for my belief by seeing them for myself, I still seem to enjoy a certain epistemic upgrade by seeing them for myself. We might call this upgrade *personal acquaintance*. There's nothing quite like perceiving for yourself, whether what's perceived is the flavor of a fine whiskey, the nastiness of a case of racial injustice, the gular area of a cormorant, the necessity of a necessary proposition, or the grace of God. The upgrade here seems to be a matter of epistemic proximity or intimacy with the object. Thinking of Linda Zagzebski's phrase, "cognitive contact with reality,"¹ the upgrade is that the contact is *closer* or more *intimate*.

Emotions, I propose, are a kind of perception that is, in its essence, non-sensory, though it often involves, or is associated with, sensory experience in one way or another. Let me try to make clear what kind of perception I have in mind.

Perception as Construal: Conceptual Perception

Consider the famous duck-rabbit.



Most people can see this figure either as a duck, or as a rabbit, at will. I shall make three points about this seeing.

FIRST, the difference between the experience of seeing the duck and that of seeing the rabbit is a difference in the way the figure *presents itself* to you. It *looks* different in the two construals; the two construals are different

¹ *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 167.

perceptual *impressions*. The difference is not well characterized, for example, by saying that when you see the figure one way you *think of* a duck, while when you see it the other way you *think of* a rabbit. In the one construal it has that rabbit-*look*, while in the other it has the duck-*look*. Presentation or impression is a characteristic of perception, and I suggest that construal more generally is a kind of perception. In this sense, perception is not “factive”; false perceptions are still perceptions (they are *misperceptions*). The point is that as perceptions, they have impression content. Mere judgments don’t have impression content.

My **SECOND** point is that the duck-rabbit shows that perception in this sense is *not entirely sensory*. The different “looks” of the duck and rabbit don’t result from a sensory difference, because the two different perceptions have exactly the same sensory content while having different impression contents. So there must be a kind of perceptual “input” that is non-sensory. Whence, then, comes this difference in presentational content?

My **THIRD** point is that the perceptual difference between the two construals is made by the way the features of the figure are *organized* in perception, and that the organization in turn depends on how the features are *conceptualized* or, to put the matter a little differently, what *roles* the features of the figure are assigned in perception.

For example, the protrusions on the right side of the figure are assigned the role of beak if you’re seeing it as a duck, and they are ears if you’re seeing it as a rabbit. The darker spot in the upper middle of the rounded area is the eye in either case, but it appears to be looking in somewhat different directions depending on which animal you’re seeing, and this is plausibly explained by the “use” you’re making, in the different cases, of the elements of the drawing—the different roles you’re perceptually assigning to them. When you perceptually “assign” any crucial feature of the drawing a different organic role, the *whole* “look” of the drawing changes; and vice-versa, when you make a different whole of it, the significance of each part changes. Role-assignments to features are interdependent with the character of the whole.

We might say that construal is *conceptual* perception, as distinguished from *sensory* perception, inasmuch as it depends on how you conceptualize, in perception, the parts or aspects of the construal’s occasion. In the duck-rabbit case, it depends on conceptualizing those protrusions on the right of

the figure (which is the “occasion”) either as ears or as a beak; or alternatively, on conceptualizing the whole figure as a picture-duck or a picture-rabbit.

Still, there is sensory information involved in the construals of the duck-rabbit, so the experience is a kind of visual (sensory) experience, despite its conceptual nature. Furthermore, the duck-rabbit works by way of resemblance; it looks a little bit like both a duck and a rabbit, and if it didn't, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to construe it as such. For example, if we try to construe it as a bowl of gerberas, we run up against the limits of visual conceptual perception, because the drawing doesn't provide the visual resources for such construal; it doesn't *look* enough like a bowl of gerberas for us (most of us, at any rate) to construe it visually in these terms. The sensory information in the drawing (minimal though it is) provides the needed resemblance to a duck and rabbit, but not to a bowl of gerberas.

More Purely Conceptual Perception

Consider now a case that doesn't depend on resemblance. Some people, upon hearing or seeing the following sentence, do not hear or see it as a syntactically correct, meaningful English sentence:

*Fish fish fish fish fish.*²

It doesn't make *sense* to them. It strikes them as just a string of words that doesn't *say* anything. But it can make sense to you, if you hear or read it in the right way. To make sense of it, you must *organize it perceptually*, and you do this by perceptually assigning parts of speech and differential word meanings (that is, broadly, *roles*) to each of the five words. One possible assignment is as follows:

<i>Fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish.</i>
<i>main subject noun</i>	<i>subordinate clause subject noun</i>	<i>subordinate clause verb</i>	<i>main verb</i>	<i>main clause object noun</i>

Filling in connectors brings out the syntax:

² I am grateful to Adam Morton for pointing me to this example.

Fish [that] fish fish fish [for other] fish.

Or, translating the verb ‘to fish’ with the verb ‘to catch,’ we get

Fish [that] fish catch catch fish.

We see here the same conceptual perception phenomenon noted in the case of the duck-rabbit. Just as the construal of the figure as a duck requires the assignment of roles to the parts of the figure, so the construal of the whole string of words as a meaningful English sentence requires that each of the word-tokens be perceptually assigned an appropriate grammatical and semantic role. It happens that, like the duck-rabbit, the fish sentence can be construed (read, perceived) in more than one way. It can also be read using the following assignments:

<i>Fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish.</i>
<i>main subject noun</i>	<i>main verb</i>	<i>main clause object noun</i>	<i>subordinate clause subject noun</i>	<i>subordinate clause verb</i>

Paraphrasing again, this time we get

Fish catch fish [that] fish catch.

Grammatical and semantic roles are concepts, so such assignment is a conceptual activity. But it is performed perceptually. In hearing (or reading) the string of words as an English sentence, one assigns each word-token its grammatical role by *perceiving* it properly, and in perceiving each token properly one relates it properly (that is, hears or sees it in some sense-making relation) to its companions and thus perceives (hears or sees) the whole as a well-formed English sentence.

The relatively unsophisticated construals of the duck-rabbit exploit the same conceptual-perceptual capacities as the much more sophisticated construals of the fish sentence. It is the ability perceptually to organize into a meaningful whole the parts of something that admit such organization. A pervasive example of normal people’s ability to do this is facial recognition. Neurologically normal people are extremely competent at recognizing human faces, and this is a non-analytic capacity that nevertheless obviously

exploits differences among noses, eyes, forehead size and shape, distance-proportions among face-parts, etc.

The difference between the linguistic case and the more simply visual cases is that in the fish sentence the conceptual assignments are not made on the basis of resemblance ('fish' in no way resembles a fish or the activity of fishing) and indeed, the words in the sentence are not differentiated from one another by any strictly visual or auditory marks. They all sound and look the same. Even their spatial-temporal placement in the sentence doesn't determine the meaning of the sentence, as is shown by the fact that each word token, taken on its own, is indistinguishable from all the others. The perception of the word-string as a sentence results from your assigning grammatical and semantic roles to the word-tokens. And yet note that even here there are a limited number of ways to construe the string of words; not just any set of role-assignments makes sense.

If we try, for example, to construe the sentence according to the following conceptual schema, we reach the limits of construal:

<i>Fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish</i>	<i>fish.</i>
<i>main verb</i>	<i>subordinate clause verb</i>	<i>subordinate clause subject noun</i>	<i>main clause object noun</i>	<i>main subject noun</i>

Paraphrasing as before, we get

Catch catch fish fish fish.

That is beyond my powers of construal, at least. The crucial indication of failure here is that the ordering doesn't *feel* sense making. It doesn't *satisfy* the way the two successful construals do. This is apparently a conceptual scheme in conformity to which the fish sentence can't be *understood*.

Perhaps we can see even better the point about perception by imagining somebody who can't hear the fish sentence as a sentence, but by some method of calculation and inference can figure out the grammatical assignments of the word tokens. Beginning students of Greek, when "construing" a sentence for a teacher, sometimes figure out the grammar and vocabulary of a Greek sentence in this sort of way (looking up the words in a dictionary and the noun- and verb-endings in an inflection table). That

would not be construing in the sense that I'm trying to explain, which essentially involves "hearing," "seeing," or "thinking" the sentence as a grammatical whole, and "hearing," "seeing," or "thinking" the sense that *Fish [that] fish catch catch fish* or *Fish catch fish [that] fish catch*. Another way to put the point would be to say that, while this imagined person can figure out and assign the roles to the parts of the sentence, he doesn't really *understand* it.

Construal in this sense is a kind of perception, an impression that results from a power of the mind to synthesize the diverse parts of something that "works" as a whole into an impression of the whole that it works as. Here, perceptual organization differs from purely intellectual or calculating organization.

So there's a strong analogy between the ability to see the duck-rabbit as a rabbit (or a duck) and the ability to hear the fish sentence as a sentence. An inability of either kind is both a failure of understanding and a failure of perception in the broad sense that I'm proposing. In each case, the person who construes the object in a sense-making way undergoes a phenomenal presentation, a holistic impression, as a result of perceptually organizing a body of "data."

The two features of construal—its organic, structural, or gestalt character, and its non-sensory presentational or phenomenal character—are not separable, and they conspire to endow construals with the power to yield three potential epistemic goods: *understanding*, *acquaintance*, and *justification*.

Emotions as Concern-Based Construals

Let's now turn to emotions. On the view of emotions that I endorse, they are *concern-based* construals. That is, they are perceptions, in the construal sense of the word, in which one or more of the elements going into the construal is a concern. I take it that the construals we've looked at so far are not concern-based, and so are not emotions. (If you're a duck or rabbit lover, or have a duck or rabbit phobia, you perhaps got a mild affective buzz out of seeing the duck-rabbit. Otherwise, I doubt that your seeing it as a duck or rabbit was an emotional experience.)

The idea that emotions are *concern*-based construals is that, for example, you will never feel fear if you don't care about the thing that you see as threatened, nor anger if you're not concerned about the thing that is offended against, nor shame if you don't care about being worthy of respect. You come into a situation that has emotional potential for you with a dispositional (or occurrent) concern or desire, or an attachment; you then construe the situation in the terms characteristic of some emotion type, and the situation emotionally appears to you as it does because the terms in which you see the situation impinge on, connect with, that concern. An instance of fear, for example, might look like this:

BASIC CONCERN	CONSTRUAL	MOTIVATION
I care about this child's wellbeing —>	I construe X as threatening the child's wellbeing—>	I am moved to protect the child against the threat

Each emotion type has a package of concepts that “define” the emotion type. *Threat* is the lead concept for fear. *Wellbeing* and *protect* [avoid] are correlative concepts inasmuch as threat is *threat to wellbeing* and protection or avoidance is *protection of wellbeing against threat* or *avoidance of loss of wellbeing in the face of threat*.

Here is what I call the “defining proposition” for fear:

Fear for Y: *X presents a threat to Y of a significant degree of probability; may X or its threatened consequences for Y be avoided.*³

The defining proposition for an emotion type outlines the way in which the elements of the situation are sense-makingly ordered in an emotion of that type. The defining proposition for fear outlines the way in which a person sense-makingly orders a situation in which he is afraid of something (X) on something's (Y's) behalf.

On the construal view of emotions, when a person fears something, he sees (feels, understands) the situation as having the form expressed in the above defining proposition, and typically wants the situation changed in a way suggested by the propositional form as integrated with the basic concern

³ *Emotions*, p. 195, modified.

(namely, concern for the wellbeing of Y). (The concern is unexpressed in the defining proposition, though suggested by the word ‘threat.’) Just as seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck consists in perceptually assigning roles to the elements of the drawing, and hearing the fish sentence as saying something coherent about fishes’ fishing activities consists in perceptually assigning grammatical and semantic roles to its word tokens, so fearing that one’s child will fall off the wall consists in perceptually assigning roles to aspects of the situation, and thus arranging them in the conceptual order of the defining proposition for fear: the child is **Y**, the **threat** to his **wellbeing** is his treading near the edge of the wall, and the **avoidance** of the threat to the child or the **protection** of the child’s wellbeing against the threat is some action that will prevent his falling off the wall. The parent who experiences this fear **cares** about the wellbeing of his child and perceives the whole situation (with its aspects thus perceptually assigned) through the lens of this care.

We can easily imagine an adolescent watching a video of the child treading dangerously close to the edge of the wall, seeing that the child is in danger of falling off and thus in need of protection, without experiencing any anxiety or fear. Perhaps the adolescent is only curious to see whether the child will fall. The difference between the adolescent’s construal and the parent’s is less in the propositional structure of his perception than in the adolescent’s lack of appropriate concern.

The drawing, the sentence, and the situation of the child are all configurations of elements that invite and enable further sense-making configuring by a perceiving subject.

Affect

As a *concern*-based construal—one in which the subject’s concern is integrated into his perception of the situation in terms of the concepts that structure the emotion type in question—the construal is a perception that is “colored” in value (negative value in the case of fear). The coloration that the construal derives from the integration of the concern is *affect*. In the case of most emotions, affect is pleasant or unpleasant. Fear is unpleasant, hope pleasant. Affect is what makes the construal feel like an *emotion* and like the particular *type* of emotion that it is and the *particular* emotion that it is. Thus the negative value coloring of *fear* is more specifically the sense that something amiss is threatening to happen, and the affect of the *particular*

fear that my child is about to fall off the wall has that propositional content. Affect is the phenomenal or qualitative experiential difference between an emotion and a non-emotional construal. If the basic concern were not picked up in (integrated into) the construal, then the construal would be merely a non-affective construal of the child's wellbeing being threatened, and would not be a perception of the value of the situation.

As I have commented, the concern that is basic to the emotion not only generates the affect, but also the motivation characteristic of fear. But from now on I'll make only passing reference to emotional motivation, because affect is what makes possible emotional perception of value qualities like *threat, culpable offense, good prospects, the beloved, and enhancement of self*.

Emotions and Moral Judgments

Perhaps we can now see how an emotion may be the perceptual basis of a moral judgment. Consider

What the Underground Man did to Liza the prostitute was outrageously unjust.

One emotion type that seems appropriate to this judgment is indignation, or at least some form of anger. Here is the defining proposition for indignation:

Indignation: *S has very culpably offended in the important matter of X (action or omission), and is bad; I am very confident of being in a moral position to condemn; S deserves (ought) to be hurt for X; may S be hurt for X.*⁴

Since the defining proposition is merely a schema, to produce an actual emotion of the type, the situation type sketched in the above propositional form needs to be filled out in a narrative that instantiates the offense and the offender and suggests reasons for attributing culpability for the offense to the offender. Such a situation is narrated in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.⁵ To enhance its emotional impressiveness, I'll summarize the story as though you know the man and Liza, though I think most sensitive

⁴ See *Emotions*, p. 215.

⁵ Part II, sections v–x.

readers of Dostoevsky's novella will have felt something like the indignation I'll talk about.

Imagine that someone tells you the following story. A man you know personally has been insulted and rejected by his associates at a dinner party, and afterwards follows them to a brothel to start a fight, only to find that they have already dispersed into the rooms of the brothel. While there he falls in with a prostitute, Liza, whom you also know well enough to be concerned about her wellbeing. The man wants to assuage his wounded vanity, and has been in the habit of doing so by exercising power over others. After he has slept with Liza he preaches a little sermon to her on the glories of family life and the degradations of prostitution. He pours it on really thick, and by his rhetoric reduces her to a condition of bitter remorse, and of gratitude and admiration toward himself. Overplaying his assumed role of judge and savior he gives her his address on departing, indicating that she may come to him. When she does come to his room several days later in hopes of pursuing the relationship with her sage redeemer, he is humiliated by her seeing his poverty and turns on her with vindictive anger, telling her that he never cared for her at all, doesn't mind if she degrades herself in prostitution, and was only using her to salve the social wounds he had received at the drinking party. In her disillusionment she is devastated and leaves.

Let us say that your response to the story is **indignation** against the man for falsely raising Liza's expectations, shamelessly jeopardizing her to relieve his own emotional pain, and punishing her for doing just what he had invited her to do. In your indignation you are vividly impressed with the nastiness of the situation, the blameworthiness of the Underground Man, and the victimization of Liza. (This evaluative coloring of the facts of the situation is what I call the emotion's affect.) Your indignation is based on a concern for Liza's wellbeing and a more general concern for justice. These prior concerns are dispositional in you, and prior to your hearing the story are neither a feeling of any kind nor a desire to do anything in particular. But now, upon hearing the story, you not only feel strongly about the situation, but want to do something in particular. You would like to get hold of the man and make him regret deeply and intensely what he has done to her. Toward Liza you feel an aching compassion, which has been aroused by the narrative, and it too involves a desire to do something in particular—in this case, to console her, to assuage her suffering, to let her know that you support her.

In your experience of being angry at the Underground Man for his treatment of Liza, he appears to you as **culpable, bad, and deserving of hurt** for what he has done. This impression is strongly analogous to the way the duck appears to you when you see the duck-rabbit as a duck, and the fish sentence appears to you when you construe it as a grammatically correct sentence. A notable difference between the construal of the duck-rabbit and the construal of the Underground Man is that the relevant parts of the drawing appear to you simultaneously, while relevant aspects of the Underground Man's action are collected serially in the course of the narrative. The situation appears to you as a structured whole with a certain complex value.

Underground Man has very culpably and shockingly rejected Liza after manipulating her and causing her to trust and care for him, and is a complete jerk; I am very confident of being in a moral position to condemn him; and he deserves to be made to regret vividly and painfully what he has done, as repayment for his vile behavior. May he be made so to suffer regret.

This summary is what I call the emotion's material proposition; it is the actual propositional content of the emotion token. In your indignation, the parts of the situation depicted in the narrative have come together for you into a whole and impress you powerfully with their (mostly dis)value. The concern-based construal of the depicted situation is your perception of the situation as a meaningful whole with values of particular kinds.

As you read the final sections of *Notes from Underground*, the narrative unfolds, yielding the features which, brought together, become the material for the indignation construal. Nowhere in the text does the word 'injustice' occur, and *it* may not occur to you, the reader, either. But if you are normally compassionate and have a sense of justice, you will perhaps feel the indignation that is expressed in the material proposition above. This felt indignation is then the perceptual basis for your judgment that the Underground Man has treated Liza very unjustly.⁶ What do we mean by 'basis'?

Let's admit that it's possible to make this judgment, and to derive it from the story, without feeling indignation toward the Underground Man or

⁶ In fact, you might say that the material proposition, if believed (or "believed," as in the case of fiction), *is* the judgment.

compassion for Liza. Perhaps we can imagine a highly intelligent person with severe frontal lobe damage who reads the story without emotion and is able to come to the conclusion that the Underground Man has treated Liza unjustly. (Perhaps he was reared among normal people and taught to recognize injustice by its empirical marks, or perhaps earlier in life he was emotionally normal.) He can point to all the right evidence and give all the appropriate reasons, if asked to justify his judgment. So let's admit that someone could be epistemically justified in making this moral judgment without his own emotion being the basis for the judgment.

Also, I don't mean to insist on indignation as the only emotion through which you can perceive the moral properties of the Underground Man's actions toward Liza. Strictly speaking, what you perceive in your indignation is not merely the injustice of his action, but its *blameworthy* injustice. Perhaps, in view of the earlier parts of the story, where you get to know the Underground Man's mind, you have misgivings about your initial indignant reaction to his conduct. You think: he is such a wreck of a human being that it's unclear whether he's morally responsible for his actions. Maybe his actions are more like a natural disaster, an occurrence for which the "agent" cannot be held responsible. So perhaps on reflection your emotion changes from indignation to sadness. Now what you perceive is not blameworthy injustice, but merely *lamentable* injustice.

So there's more than one possible emotional reaction to the Underground Man's action, and the different emotions correspond to different judgments. To decide whether the judgment of blameworthy injustice is more truthful than the judgment of merely lamentable injustice, or vice-versa, we might go back and read the story together and have a conversation.

Still, one who feels the injustice for herself, by way of her emotion, whether it be indignation or lament, has an epistemically *higher quality* judgment than the emotionless person. The perceptual experience of the injustice gives her *deeper understanding* and more *intimate cognitive contact* with this moral reality, and possibly more justification for her judgment, than someone who reads the story without emotion. Supposing that the emotional reader is mature enough in her moral emotional formation, she is like the person who has seen the double-crested cormorants for himself, as compared with the person whose true beliefs about the birds are based on less direct epistemic contact.