

Title Redacted

please do not distribute or cite without permission

Perceptual experiences have an affective character or ‘valence’: coffee tastes good, garbage smell bad, notes have a beautiful tone, and pains hurt. Such experiences seem to have a *dual character*: they are epistemically significant—disclosing information about the value of their objects to subjects *and* they seem to be intrinsically motivating, giving perceivers defeasible reason to pursue or avoid their objects. I argue that what have been taken to be competing considerations on an account of valence—epistemic and motivational significance—are compatible. Further, existing accounts tend to treat them as competing considerations, thus accommodating one of them at the expense of the other. Here I argue that the phenomenon of valence gives us compelling grounds for accommodating both kinds of consideration and offer an account that is capable of doing so, which explains how valence can exhibit both a world-to-mind and mind-to-world direction of fit. It will turn out, I claim, that the difficult choice between cognitivist and non-cognitivist accounts of valence isn’t forced upon us. Finally, I recommend affective character as a topic of special interest to metaethics, because it speaks to questions in the epistemology of value that have long puzzled the field.

Keywords: valence, direction of fit, evaluative perception, taste

Conventionally, it's supposed that perception represents its objects in a 'cold' or affectively neutral way. But this assumption has recently encountered decisive philosophical and empirical resistance: perceptual experiences feel *good* and *bad* to undergo. Moreover, by feeling good or bad, affectively valenced experiences do not merely 'say' that their objects have certain evaluative properties (good, bad, etc.), they engage the perceiver practically. When we burn a finger on a hot pan, feel a cool breeze on a hot day, or hear a dissonant musical interval, we seem to be aware of certain values as well as to find ourselves in the position of those values already mattering to us, just insofar as we are aware of them.

In this article I motivate a novel view of perceptual valence: perceptual experiences *inherit* the value of their objects. Delicious coffee tastes good: the *experience* of the coffee is good because the *coffee* itself is good. Garbage smells bad: the *experience* of the garbage is bad because the *garbage* itself is bad. Physical pains, which signal disruptions to the body's homeostasis, *hurt*. I term the view that I articulate and defend here '*affectivism*'. In a slogan: perception discloses value affectively.

The principle of *inheritance* is a relational, as opposed to a representational principle of perception. For a perception to *represent* a value is for it to ascribe an evaluative property to the object of perception, such that the content of the experience is true if the object instantiates the evaluative property ascribed to it. *Affectivism* suggests that value is disclosed to perceivers in perception in an entirely different way: the affective character of the experience itself is a function of the value of the object of experience. The mark of affective character is that an experience is pleasant or painful, and in this manner reflects the value of its object to the perceiver. No appeal to truth-apt content is necessary to describe this function. A major consequence of accepting that value perception is governed by *inheritance* is that it opens the possibility of accepting the view that, just insofar as any perceiver (human and non-human animal alike) is undergoing pleasant and painful experiences, the subject possesses a *de re* awareness of the value relations that diverse aspects of

their lived environment stand in to her.¹ This suggests that value-perception, rather than a sophisticated capacity that is only available to mature, reasoning humans, is a primitive aspect of perception that precedes its representational aspect and that is present in basic animals who possess little more than sensory pain and locomotion.

A theory of perception's affective valence lies at the intersection of value theory, epistemology, and perception. It will figure not only in questions about how we make judgments about the state of the external world, but also how we are motivated by the values we discern. A central question about valence, pursued vis-a-vis an account of pain, is whether it is to be understood as, primarily, a motivational or an epistemic phenomenon. Treatments of valence tend to fall into two camps: those who treat it as having a *world-to-mind* direction of fit—imperativist theorists, desire theorists, and attitudinal theorists—and those who, alternately, treat it as having a *mind-to-world* direction of fit—cognitivists about the emotions (including perceptual and judgmental varieties) and evaluativists about pain and perception, who conceive of valence in representational terms—that is, as a representation of value.² Those who embrace a world-to-mind direction of fit have traditionally been exercised by considerations about the *motivational* character of valence—its ability to engage the perceiver practically and to set the aims of action. Cognitivists, in contrast, have been more concerned with the epistemic or empirical character of valence, sometimes identified as valence's 'rationalizing role,'—how it informs and guides perceivers to practical success.

Cognitivism and non-cognitivism about valence each face serious objections from the opposing side. Those who embrace a world-to-mind direction of fit (non-cognitivists) are susceptible to objections based on observations that support the claim that affective character is

¹ While I maintain that the *affective perceptual* awareness of the value relation is most aptly characterized as *de re* rather than *de dicto*, it is nevertheless possible that, as a perceiver learns about these value relations empirically, they also acquire an empirically-founded *de dicto* awareness of the value relation which shades into this affective perceptual awareness phenomenologically.

² Imperativism is defended by Hall (2008), Klein (2007, 2015), Martínez (2011, 2015), Barlassina and Hayward (2019a, 2019b), Martínez and Barlassina (2023). The desire theory is defended by Heathwood (2007) and Brady (2018). Attitudinalism is defended by Jacobson (2019, 2021) and De Vignemont (2023). Evaluativism is defended about pain perception by Bain (2013, 2017, 2019) and Cutter and Tye (2011, 2014) and as a proposal about emotions and other non-sensory pleasures and displeasures by Helm (2002), Mendelovici (2013), Tappolet (2016), Carruthers (2018, 2023), and Rossi (2024).

epistemically significant. For example, that affective character seems crucial to how animals are oriented to their environments and how actions guided by affective character are often successful in promoting the interests of their subjects. Those who embrace a mind-to-world direction of fit (cognitivists) are susceptible to objections based on valence's seemingly intrinsic motivational character. Pains and other affective states seem to move us on the basis of their 'hot' phenomenology and, moreover, to do so independently of whether we endorse the ends of the actions they recommend. For example, we are disposed to quit painful tasks even when we intend to finish them. Cognitivists—in particular, evaluativists, who claim that pain is constituted by negative evaluative content—are accused of being unable to explain this. For example, the 'messenger-shooting objection' points out that it is rational to get rid of pain for its own sake (i.e. to shoot the messenger by taking painkillers) even though there is no equivalent reason to think it is rational to rid ourselves of negative evaluative content.³

The difficulty here is not entirely novel. Others have observed the need for *dual direction of fit* states—Ruth Millikan posits pushmi-pullyu representations (PPRs), while some cognitivists about moral judgment have defended the existence of intrinsically motivating cognitive states (besires).⁴ *Affectivism* is sympathetic to the existence of these states, classifying affective valences as among their ranks. The question facing a proponent of a dual-direction of fit analysis is whether valences can aptly be characterized in terms of content at all without an internally coherent notion of the sort of content that can play both roles: reflecting how the world is *and* dictating how it should be.

Inheritance is a normative principle that, I will argue, is capable of accommodating both the epistemic and practical/motivational character of valence, and hence its dual direction-of-fit. In other words, it aims to explain why valences both inform their subjects of the value of their objects and motivate them to pursue or avoid these objects *in a unified manner*, without requiring that the

³ Jacobson (2013), Cutter and Tye (2014), Brady (2015), Aydede and Fulkerson (2018) and Bain (2019).

⁴ Millikan (1995); McDowell and other 'anti-Humeans' are accused by Michael Smith of being committed to 'besires' (1994). No dual-direction of fit analysis of *valence* has been offered previously—moral judgments are the subject of McDowell and Smith's inquiries.

perceiver make additional rational moves from an evaluative belief to a practical interest or a practical interest to an evaluative belief.

The article proceeds as follows. I begin by considering the empirical and pre-theoretical demand for a theory of perceptual valence (§1). Second, I argue for the epistemic significance of valence, the idea that it provides empirical guidance for practical success. In §2 I consider reasons for thinking that affective valence is intrinsically motivating. Imperativism, attitudinalism, the desire theory, and psychofunctionalism similarly endorse this claim, giving diverse explanations of valence's world-to-mind direction of fit. Evaluativism, in contrast, which can accommodate valence's epistemic significance has been accused of failing to accommodate valence's motivational force. In §3 I present affectivism, which offers an explanation of the dual-character of valence as both epistemically significant and intrinsically motivating. §4 briefly recommends why a dual-direction of fit account of perceptual valence is highly relevant to metaethicists concerned with the epistemology of value.

§1: The centrality of perception's affective character

I join with a small but growing set of theorists in recognizing the centrality of affective character to our lived experience. Consider Hilla Jacobson (an attitudinalist) on the importance of this idea:

“Often, when information is delivered perceptually, it does not leave us cold; rather, its registration is marked by our being positively or negatively affected. Relatedly, many experiences seem inherently motivational, at minimum disposing us to approach or avoid their objects...The sensible world, with its colors, odors, tastes and shapes, is not given to us in an evaluatively neutral, inert manner; rather, our perceptual interactions with it are infused with valence.”⁵

Since this 2021 article, Jacobson and others have been rectifying valenced perception's philosophical neglect, though there is still much territory yet to be traversed.⁶ I'll reiterate the growing consensus among both philosophers and scientists that valence or affective character is a

⁵ Jacobson, 2021, p. 482.

⁶ De Vignemont (2023), Carruthers (2023), Martínez and Barlassina (2023), Mitchell (2024), Jacobson (in press), Werner (n.d.).

ubiquitous feature of perception across the canonical sense modalities, and that it is a perceptual, not a post-perceptual, phenomenon. The claim of ubiquity is especially pointed given the recognition that affective character may be *neutral* and that such neutral valences may be as epistemically significant as positive and negative valences.

Pre-theoretical observation indicates that perceptual experiences can be good or bad, positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, as well as neutral in these aspects. Empirical research concurs—‘microvalences’ (near-neutral affect) and ‘macrovalences’ (strongly positive or negative affect) are processed via both subcortical and cortical pathways, which supports the view that valence is a continuum and that it is intrinsic to all perception, including neutrally valenced perception.⁷

The view the perception is valenced cuts against the tacitly popular view that perception is evaluatively neutral. Some will claim that evaluative properties fail to be represented in perception. Others that apparently perceptual valence is a concurrent cognitive or affective phenomenon that occurs separately from perceptual processes whose function is the recognition of objects and properties. *Prima facie*, these are substantive claims that find little empirical or non-empirical support. Empirical data tend to show that object recognition is facilitated by valence and that the response times of valence fall within a perceptual timeframe.⁸ Further, we find cognitive ethologists embracing the claim that hedonic (e.g. valenced) experience is behaviorally adaptive, allowing animals to respond to pathological complexity.

Apart from empirical reasons to doubt the neutrality thesis, attention to *non-visual* perception—particularly smell, taste, and touch—pre-empirically implies that valence is a fundamental dimension of perceptual appearances. That is, good and bad smells, pleasant and unpleasant tastes, and painful and pleasant tactile sensations are paradigmatic of those sense modalities. Perceptual affect or valence bears the perceptual hallmarks of *stimulus dependence* and *modal specificity*. It is the

⁷ Jacobson (2021), González Arias and Toribio (unpublished).

coldness of water that is pleasant, for example. Here tactile contact with the water is essential to the valenced experience. Similarly for the good taste of coffee or the pleasant appearance of cornflower blue. Proponents of the neutrality thesis must offer alternative explanations of the presence of these perceptual hallmarks and our folk psychological treatment of bad smell, tastes, and feels as perceptual phenomena. My aim here is simply to explain why the neutrality thesis cannot be uncontroversially assumed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue against it. Insofar as we accept that perception is valenced, we can take up the question of the epistemic or cognitive significance of this phenomenon as an aspect of perception qua empirical capacity.

§2 Epistemic Significance

What is it for valence to be epistemically significant? The idea here is that valenced appearances track what is of value or disvalue to a subject, such that undergoing a valenced experience puts the subject in a better position to judge (theoretically) what is good for themselves or (practically) what to do next. Animal cases make the notion of epistemic significance especially clear. For instance, snails can navigate effectively on the basis of valenced experience. When snails encounter a hostile environment (say they find themselves on a patch of hot sand) they can use their hedonically valenced experiences to sense this condition and, consequently move themselves to a safer, more hospitable environment (e.g. a damp rock). We can safely assume that snails are not rational creatures: their cognitive simplicity implies that they lack the capacity to make practical inferences, thus they are not employing a higher-level rational inference to move from the hot sand to the cool rock—rather they are directly motivated by a perceptual input. The most plausible explanation of how they achieve this intelligent, self-promoting behavior is that the perceptual signals they obey are epistemically significant with respect to the value of objects. Otherwise it would be a remarkable coincidence that those behaviors would typically promote the animals' interests.

We can formalize the hypothesis of epistemic significance into a few key claims:

1. There is a normative relationship between perceptual valences and the response-independent axiological relations in which subjects stand to various objects of perception. The relevant norm is that the better the match between the axiological relation (positive/negative) and the valence (positive/negative), that is, the closer the correspondence between the polarity and intensity of value and valence, the better off the subject is epistemically (the better standing they have to make judgments of choice-worthiness). For instance, if the more an animal needs water the better it tastes, the better off that animal is in judging the water to be choice-worthy.

2. Supporting this normative relationship is some sort of *basing relationship* between the experience and its elements, such as that an experience *represents the elements*, *presents the elements*, or is *caused by the elements*. This amounts to some sort of more precise story as to why perceptual appearances track their objects.

3. Owing to this basing relationship, the experience stands ready to justify other epistemically significant states, such as perceptual beliefs and practical judgments. Epistemic significance is not a matter of a perceptual state being, already, a believing or a knowing, rather it is state that *positions the subject* to believe, know, or act knowledgeably.

The suggestion that affective character is epistemically and empirically significant faces an immediate and pressing objection: frequently, valenced appearances fail to track the values of their objects. We might call this the objection from ‘valence variance’: Unhealthy foods taste delicious. Beneficial medical procedures are painful and aversive. Ultimately debilitating recreational drugs generate blissful sensory experiences. A central motivation for non-cognitivist accounts of valence is that they claim to be able explain valence variance, while cognitivist accounts cannot.⁹

A first line response to the objection might be that valence variance is due to the fact that, as a perceptual capacity, affective perception is fallible. The fallibility of perception should have a role to play in the story on any objectivist theory of value. If perception tells us that twinkies *are* good because they *taste* good, such instances are simply failures of the capacity of perception to be

⁹ Hume (1760), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000), Jacobson (2021).

sensitive to the value of its objects. The shortcoming of this explanatory move comes into view when we compare disputes across valenced appearances with disputes across perceptual appearances involving other kinds of ordinary empirical properties. Disagreement across valenced appearances seems to be far more *prevalent* than disagreement across appearances of other empirical properties—that is, where we find *a few* disputes between perceivers about the color or shape of a given object, we find *many* disputes over what tastes good, looks good, sounds good etc. Thus, we seek an explanation of the difference in the prevalence of disagreement, which an appeal to the fallibility of the capacity cannot satisfy.

Defenders of the epistemic significance of valence have a viable set of responses. We can show that many of the cases which appear to violate the rule that valence tracks value don't actually fit that description. These fall into three categories: (1) Accurate valences which disagree across subjects due to intersubjective differences in the objective axiological relations which valences track. (2) Accurate valences which fail to reflect something's *all-things-considered* value, but succeed in reflecting its value *in some way*. (3) Accurate valences for which the axiological relation involves discounted features of the subject, such as the subject's individual history or cultural heritage. The remaining cases are those in which valences are genuinely inaccurate, we may argue. These may be treated in the same manner as deficient perceptual appearances of ordinary empirical properties such as hallucinations and illusions, *prima facie*. It may turn out that these are no more prevalent than non-veridical perceptions of empirical properties, once the other three categories are taken into account.

The animal cases mentioned earlier show us that the sort of value to which perception is plausibly sensitive is not value conceived of monadically, but rather value *for* a certain animal or person. E.g. hot sand is bad for *this snail*, it is not bad simpliciter. This relational or dyadic conception of non-moral value implies that accurate valences will vary across perceivers in correspondence with how values themselves vary across perceivers, given differences in a subject's objective interests. Whether a certain object stands to benefit or harm a certain subject will be the measure of whether an accurate perception of that object is positively or negatively valenced. Thus,

recognizing category 1 is a way of acknowledging that not all valence variance is evidence of valence inaccuracy.

The types of value relations to which perception may be sensitive is plausible quite open, including biological, practical, aesthetic, and ethical value. While humans' biological needs are generally quite consistent, what is practically or non-morally good for a subject depend on the subject's aims and individual needs. Thus, ice cream tends to taste better to those in a calorie deficit, a paved path is a welcome sight to a wheelchair user, and the shade of a tree particularly comforting to someone overheated. If these positive valences aren't matched by the neutral valences of other subjects, this may be because the value relations in which other subjects stand to the same objects themselves differ.

The second category draws out another common way of thinking about value that can generate the appearance of inaccuracy among perceptual valences. This is that we tend to think of value in terms of how we reason about value: what is *all-things-considered* valuable or what is *best* tends to be far more relevant to our explicit practical reasoning than what is of value *in some way*. Foods that we tend to think of unhealthy—french fries, candy, soda, etc.—may fail the test of *all-things-considered* value—the way in which they are calorically nourishing is generally inferior to the way in which other, more nutritively diverse foods are calorically nourishing—but french fries, candy, and soda are nevertheless response-independently good *in some way*: they provide calories, a necessary good. Thus, the good taste of French fries may be informing us of its value, albeit only its value *in some way*. This is comparable to other spheres of perception—though vision tells us about the shapes of objects, it doesn't tell us about the absolute shape of the objects from any angle, but the apparent shape of an object from a particular visible angle. Just as vision may omit relevant details about the far-sides of objects, valenced perception may persistently fail to capture what is best for a subject, even while consistently relaying what is in good or bad for a subject *in some way*.

A third, powerful form of objection to the epistemic desideratum identifies yet another kind of valence-value mismatch: valences that seem untethered from any prior idea of value. Candidates might include feeling of sunlight on a cool day, the softness of rabbit fur, or the unpleasant stench of certain innocuous flowers, the pleasant appearance of the ocean's blueness. What benefit or harm

do any of these elements pose to a subject? Yet perceptions of them may be distinctly valenced. Thus there is an inclination to think that here epistemic significance fails—that, because e.g. the ocean’s blueness is only good *because* it’s pleasant to look at, that these are not responsive to genuine values for the subject independently of their valenced responses.

An initial response is that these valences seem to be closely related to the valences associated with experiences of fine art, since the value of artwork is not to be found in its ability to fulfill any apparent biological, practical, or ethical need of human beings. Nevertheless engaging with art is a kind of good which is central to human life.¹⁰ It is consistent with an objectivism about the value of artworks that they stand in determinate axiological relations to individuals on account of the valuable human practices that they contribute to.¹¹ In other words, if it is good for one to engage with classical literature, or modern poetry, or the practice of bonsai because those practices are themselves valuable to human life, then it is consistent with the epistemic significance of valence that a exemplary book, poem, or bonsai tree is positively valenced in experience, revealing the value of that instance to the broader practice of which it is a part.

What I suggest we draw from this analogy is that discounted features of the subject, such as their sustained participation in a specific domains of aesthetic life, renders something beneficial to them that wouldn’t otherwise register as beneficial (biologically, practically, ethically, and so on). My suggestion is that it is also discounted features of the subject that can help us understand why seemingly inconsequential or trivial features of objects are in fact valuable to individual subjects and thus why the valences that track these values (the softness of rabbit fur, the warmth of sunshine, the scent of certain flowers) are apt. It’s often recognized nowadays that the aesthetics of fine and applied arts is just one part of a much broader domain of aesthetic life. The ‘everyday aesthetics’ movement shows us that human beings cultivate aesthetic practices in all spheres of existence from the organization of linen closets, to structuring ones finances, beach combing, gardening, and grocery shopping. It is plausibly the unique profile of an individual, insofar as they engage in certain of these domains, shaping her life around these ordinary ways of being or practices, that endows the

¹⁰

¹¹

seemingly inconsequential features of objects with value or disvalue for her by constituting the aesthetic dimensions of those activities.

When we take into account these three categories, it becomes plausible that the vast majority of instances of valence variance fits into one or more of them. While this addresses the objection that valence variance is far more prevalent than variance between appearances of other empirical features of objects and those features, we also need to maintain that some valences *are* erroneous, insofar as they fail to track value. For instance, one may reasonably doubt on subjectivist grounds that pain can ever be erroneous, or that all of the immense variation in food that humans create is of any objective value, apart from its pleasant tastes. Because the proponent of epistemic significance maintains that valence tracks value, they must also maintain the possibility that perceptual valence can err.

In the case of pain, we cite the difference between, for example, ‘nerve pain’ and the pain of a broken bone or cancerous lesion. Nerve pain originates within the perceiver’s pain system, a system which ordinarily functions to detect harm, and it doesn’t indicate a further threat to the body such as a defect, deficiency, or pathology. Thus, proponents of epistemic significance for valence mark a difference between erroneous pain and apt pain, insofar as the sensation tracks a pathology. The same sort of difference can be identified in the practical or aesthetic case. A wine, mislabeled as one of high better quality than it actually is, might in fact taste superb to someone initially, but not hold up to scrutiny, if its flavor is in fact crude and imbalanced. The revelation of its true origin might spark this more accurate gustatory awareness. Similarly, someone attractive might come across in a highly positive light despite an underlying contempt for others’ interests, an appearance that might later evaporate when more relevant information about their character presents itself.

Alternately, valuable objects can sometimes pass under the radar or fail to cause positive impressions at the outset. Oysters are a divisive gustatory object—their unique texture and taste causes some of us to gravitate toward them, while others are repulsed. The proponents of epistemic significance for valence may take the (perhaps unpopular) view that to the extent that oysters are of gustatory value to the entirety of a divided group, one part of this group is in touch with the reality of oysters’ gustatory value and the other is buying into a misleading appearance.

§3 Motivational force

Having motivated the idea that valence is epistemically significant, I now turn to another key feature of valence—its intrinsically motivating character. A rancid smell, for example, is not only informative about its object, it constitutes a potent motivation to avoid that object. Similarly, the good taste of a particular food gives us *pro tanto* motivation to eat it. We (again and here forward *pro tanto*) seek out positions or places that we find comfortable (just like the snail) and move away from any negatively valenced tactile sensation or physical discomfort. Grating noises (fire alarms), ugly appearances (a soiled toilet, a crushed insect), and bad tastes (spoiled milk), not only inform us about the value-status of those objects, but pre-reflectively incline subjects to apt behaviors with respect to them.

To acknowledge that perception is affectively valenced gives us grounds, on standard views of affect, for the view that valence has a motivational role. Plausibly, a necessary connection exists between affect and motivation through the concept of an end. First, on this hypothesis, ends provide the formal basis for purposive motivation: to act purposively (or to be disposed to it) is to act in accordance with an end. Second, affect is the subjective dimension of an end's fulfillment or frustration—pleasure signals success and pain signals frustration. On this picture, pleasure and pain aren't in the first place *causes* or *effects* of action, but reflections of the success and failure of activity relative to the end of that action. As such we can think of affective states like valence as playing a *regulatory role* with respect to action—communicating the status of an ongoing intervention so that an agent can control its outcome.

We can see the importance of this regulatory role in the case of the snail. Were the snail not immediately motivated by the pleasant and painful valences, mere awareness of the hot sand or the cool rock would do it no good. Again, we are taking it that the snail cannot perform higher level cognitive inferences about value. Thus, it could not be motivated by, say, the conjunction of a desire not to be on hot sand with a neutral awareness that it was.

Again, we can formalize this hypothesis:

- (1) Perceptual valences are defeasibly, intrinsically motivating, where to motivate intrinsically is understood to mean to motivate independently of antecedent desires or further cognitive states. For instance, pain motivates independently of a desire to avoid pain, and the good taste of food motivates independently of a desire for delicious food, and both motivate independently of further evaluative beliefs that e.g. pain is bad or that a food is choiceworthy. Thus animals who lack such evaluative beliefs can nevertheless be moved by good tastes, pains, etc.
- (2) The intrinsic motivating force of valence is a universal feature of perceptual appearances across animals of highly variant cognitive capacities. Insofar as particular valences are accurate, they motivate action that conduces to some objective interest of the perceiver (keeping in mind the earlier qualification that this is not an all-things-considered *best* interest, but *some* interest).
- (3) Valence's proto-rational motivational force is parallel to but distinct from the motivational force of reasons—to be motivated by an object of perception through valence does not require the reflective recognition of the object as a reason, yet the object of perception comprises a reason for action insofar as the perceiver is immediately aware of its value through valence. For example, by being aware of the disvalue of hot sand through pain, the snail is in a pre-reflective normative state, inclining it to 'proto-rationally' avoid the hot sand. Its awareness of the threat posed by the sand through its negative valence rationalizes the snail's voluntary motor activity, even if it lacks a reason *as such* to move away from it.

These claims make the valenced character of perception unusual among perceptual appearances as they are generally conceived. Typical, ascriptive perceptual contents (e.g. the ball is red; the door is open; the cat is sleeping) lack the intrinsic motivating character of valence. We assume that if they contribute to the perceiver's motivations, they do so inferentially, typically in conjunction with an antecedent conative state: e.g. since I ought to keep the heat inside and the door is open, I'll close the door.

Various views begin from the starting point that valence is intrinsically motivating. Proponents of *imperativism* about pain, for example, argue that sensations like pain and itch fit into an intentionalist model of perception, but that what makes these states unique is that they have

imperative content—commands such as “avoid this” or “do that”.¹² It is thus on account of perceptual valence’s motivating force that they ascribe satisfaction-apt, imperative content to perception. Imperativism is typically contrasted with the cognitivist view *evaluativism*, on which affective sensory content consists of appraisals, e.g. “x is good for me”.

Attitudinalists have in common with *imperativists* that they take the motivational force of perceptual valences to involve a particular *attitudinal mood* and that these attitudes to have satisfaction rather than truth conditions. Jacobson’s ART theory (attitudinal-representational theory) differs from imperativism and evaluativism in that it is explicitly motivated by the claim that valences fail to track values and thus are wholly independent of the contents of perceptual representations, involving only attitudes toward those contents which are not connected to the representations’ accuracy conditions.¹³ ¹⁴ The source of these attitudes are the perceiver’s conative states, rather than any external value relations to which the subject is sensitive.

Psychofunctionalism, another non-cognitivist view, holds that the motivational force of sensory affect is to be accounted for by various subpersonal motivational states, a “suite of behavioral and dispositional reactions” (Aydede and Fulkerson, 2018, p. 34) to be identified by the empirical sciences. According to their account, pains are unpleasant as a consequence of these ‘motivational processes’.

The pattern we observe is broad agreement over the desire-like direction of fit of perceptual valence even across major divisions in the appropriate explanatory model for the phenomenon. Those views that emphasize satisfaction conditions, imperatives, and motivational processes are emphasizing the same central feature of valence—that valenced states are thereby defeasibly motivating states. This has occasionally been put in terms of the distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’,

¹² This is a simplification of imperativism, which in fact takes several forms—first order, second order, and reflective imperativism—according to the type of command they endorse. These differences will not matter for our purposes.

¹³ Evaluativists hold the counterpart view to imperativists: that sensory affect is to be understood in terms of representational content, but that such content has truth rather than accuracy conditions.

¹⁴ Jacobson (2021) argues for attitudinalism by claiming there is no plausible view on which valences track values, though she does not consider the arguments for the epistemic significance of valence presented in the previous section.

where ‘hot’ cognitive states are those that have an intrinsically motivating affective dimension (physical pain, bad tastes, and pleasure), whereas ‘cold’ states are ordinary cognitions, (‘the cat is asleep’, ‘crimson is a shade of red’, ‘I’ll take a left’).¹⁵ “Hotness” is paradigmatic of valence.

Evaluativism, in contrast to these non-cognitivist accounts, is accused of failing to account for valence’s intrinsically motivating character. This has been called the ‘shooting the messenger’ objection. Critics point out that evaluativists cannot explain why it is rational to rid oneself of pain, since it is not equivalently rational to rid oneself of the content ‘x is bad for me’. If pain is merely the bearer of the message that some object beyond the pain itself is bad for one, why should that content itself be bad for the subject? Evaluativists, by analyzing valenced perceptions such as pains in terms of the *contents* of representations alone, class pains alongside ‘cold’ cognitive states with their mind-to-world direction of fit. While this puts them in an ideal position to accommodate the epistemic significance of valence, it thwarts their ability to explain its concurrent motivational force. While they reply that the specifically *evaluative* content of such representations distinguishes them from cold representational states¹⁶, it remains dubious that cognitive states such as ‘x is bad for me’ have satisfaction conditions, and thus many remain unconvinced that evaluativism offers an adequate explanation of the desire-like character or motivational force of valence.

I’ve argued that valence has a ‘dual normativity’: it conveys the value that objects stand in to perceivers and thus is governed by external value relations. Simultaneously, it motivates perceivers in light of those very value facts, providing us (as well as unsophisticated animals) with defeasible motivation to pursue or avoid various objects of perception which stand to benefit or harm us in some way. Existing accounts of valence tend to suffer from split attention: they pay attention to one of these desiderata and ignore the other. Thus, imperativism, attitudinalism, desire theories and psychofunctionalism (the non-cognitivist views) are concerned with valence’s desire-like direction of fit alone, while evaluativism (a cognitivist view) is concerned primarily with its belief-like direction of fit.

§6 *Affectivism*

¹⁵ De Vignemont (2021)

Here I propose an account of perceptual valence that can accommodate both valence's *epistemic significance* and *motivational* force. Its core claim is that we are affected by objects in the environment and that their effects upon us both inform us of the relational value of its objects and motivate us such that our behaviors reflect those values. Importantly, it appeals to a single principle to explain both of these aspects, the relational principle of 'inheritance'. *Inheritance*, here, is the notion that the valence of the axiological relation between the subject and the *experience* is inherited from the valence of the axiological relation between the subject and the *object* of experience:

***Inheritance*:** the valence of the axiological relation (the relation of being good or bad for) in which the experience stands to the subject is inherited from the valence of the axiological relation in which the object stands to the perceiver.

More intuitively: when inheritance holds, water *tastes* good to you because it *is* good for you; garbage *smells* bad to you because it *is* of disvalue; pain hurts because the object of pain poses a threat, and so on. The force of this 'because' is one of a sui genesis form of perceptual normativity: experiences are better able to inform evaluative judgments to the extent that they obey the principle of inheritance, including practical judgments about what to do and indicative, empirical judgments about what is good. Thus, when a snail's perceptions reflect the benefit of the cool rock or the harm of the hot sand, it is better able to take apt actions in response to its environment. Similarly, when we detect that water is a choiceworthy drink or that meat is spoiled through their taste or scent, we are better able to make 'judgments of choiceworthiness' how to value those objects cognitively and how to act with respect to them.

The principle formalizes the observation that there is a seemingly non-coincidental, value-involving similarity between the *objects* of experience on the one hand and the *experiences* of them on the other. This similarity concerns certain *axiological relations* (the relation of being good or bad for), and specifically a certain *pair* of axiological relations—one that holds between the perceiver and an experience of x and another that holds between the perceiver and x itself. To say that *inheritance* is a normative principle is to specify that it describes a *success condition*—the alignment of the valences of

this pair of axiological relations is an achievement. The sort of achievement that it is is neither clearly rational (a consequence of inference from reasons) nor representational (a matter of truth-conditional content). The advantage of this is its flexibility to capture the sort of proto-rational behavior of simple animals and to explain how complex animals like ourselves are able to practically engage intelligently or effectively with the material world prior to engaging our capacities for reflective reasoning. When our valences inherit the values of their objects to us, we are oriented to how the elements of our environment bear on our interests. Hence we can e.g. pick out something good to eat or somewhere safe to stand, even while engrossed in more complex cognitive tasks. And we are so oriented perceptually, rather than by means of reflective rationality.

Interpreting *inheritance* correctly requires two important qualifications. First, the two axiological relations referenced in inheritance are importantly separate and distinct. The inheritance principle does not claim that these axiological relations are identical, rather it claims that the valence and strength of one relationship establishes a standard by which the other can be gauged as more or less apt. Consider the value of imbibing water compared to the value of the experience of imbibing water. Drinking water is necessary for life and health—a mere experience of drinking water is not. Experience’s value involves enjoyment, being aware of the circumstances and being appropriately motivated, whereas the value of imbibing water entails none of these advantages. Even though the value of the experience and the value of the water are entirely different—alignment of valence and value doesn’t require any further identification of the value relations of experience to the subject and of the object to the subject.

Second, the axiological relationship of the experience of the object to the subject references the experience’s *intrinsic* value, qua experience, rather than value *in general*. Whereas the general value of an experience includes its instrumental and epistemic value, its intrinsic value excludes these features and depends only on how the subjective character of the experience in itself affects the subject. Experiences, naturally, are caused by ordinary objects, relations, and events and have effects on the subject’s cognitive economy—what they believe and do as a result of their experiences. When thinking about the inheritance principle, we should set aside the way in which these extrinsic

relations bear on the experience's value to the subject. Thus, the relation of value of the experience to the subject referenced in *inheritance* is not meant to be inclusive of the value of being perceptually related to actual objects or the value of being able to form accurate beliefs or perform effective actions on the basis of such experience. For instance one might imagine evaluating experiences as they exist inside of Nozick's experience machine.¹⁷

The 'isolated value' of a negatively valenced experience is quite different from the general value of that same experience. Pain, for example, is very valuable as a signal to a patient that something is wrong, and as source of information to a doctor about how to treat the patient. However, the negative valence of pain has an intrinsic disvalue, in isolation from these considerations. This profile fits, for example, the fact that we attempt to spare patients from the disvalue of pain with anesthesia during surgery, but consider congenital analgesia a problematic disorder. The instrumental and epistemic value of negative experience is crucial e.g. knowing that some degree of friction threatens the integrity of one's skin, even while the experience is of a fixed intrinsic disvalue to the subject.

Why is *affectivism* able to explain the dual-direction of fit character of valence? Typical accounts of external perception appeal to representational content to explain the epistemic significance of perceptual experiences. This representational content supplies a basing relation between the properties of the object of perception and the character of the experience. ~~Affectivism offers an alternative explanation of how experiences track objects: perceptual valences *present* (rather than represent) the value of their objects by standing in value relations of the same valence to their subjects that those objects do. *Inheritance* offers an explanation of the correspondence between the polarity and intensity of experiential valence and objective value.~~ This then explains how animals are defeasibly factively aware of their environments: they have *de re* knowledge of the value relations that hold between themselves and the objects of their perception. This *de re* knowledge consists in the conscious state of a valenced appearance, e.g. a bad smell or a good taste. Since the inheritance principle entails that experiences conforming to it have valences that correspond to the valence of

¹⁷ Nozick, 1974, p. 42-45.

external value relations, it also entails that perceivers possessing this conscious awareness are able to track those value relations.

Additionally, if *inheritance* supplies a basing relation between the object and the experience, we can see how such states are epistemically significant. While it might not already be a believing or a knowing as such, its character positions the subject to believe, know, or act knowledgeably. By smelling the putrid character of spoiled milk, I am in a position to judge that the milk is spoiled, even if the smell of the milk itself is not a truth-apt cognitive state. The existence of such a basing relation, even if it is not a representational form of basing, accounts for how such states position their subjects to believe, know, or act knowledgeably.

Because affectivism puts this epistemic relationship in terms of value relations, it is distinctly positioned to explain valence's motivational force. According to inheritance, the experience of the object is capable of constituting an *end* for the subject. That is, we are defeasibly justified in ridding ourselves of negatively valenced experiences just because they are bad and in seeking out good experiences because they are good. Ends like these are canonical sources of motivation. Thus *inheritance* makes the motivating force of valence unmysterious—we are motivated by affectively valenced experiences insofar as they are intrinsically good or bad for us.

I hope that this clarifies how inheritance makes possible the accommodation of valence's *dual direction-of-fit*, in contrast with other accounts. Further, it is not the experience *as such* that is motivating, but the experience *of the object*, which thereby generates not just motivating but *justifying* reasons. Insofar as the affective perception of the object is apt and positive/negative experiences of good objects motivate their own promotion/avoidance, the subject is motivated in accordance with their objective interests, as the snail case illustrates.

Inheritance is a theory of the intentional character of affective states. What it aims to do is offer a naturalistic account of how dual-direction-of-fit states are possible. In this way it has to do 'double duty', so to speak: it offers a metasemantic principle that is, at the same time, a metaethical principle. Unlike the imperatival theory, it doesn't set up a contrast between states that tell us how

the world is and states that instruct us about what to do. Nor does it motivate us to pick a side. Instead, it attempts to unite the indicative and the evaluative in order to see how a state that motivates can also, and for the same reasons, be a state that informs.

Finally, I should specify that, as *inheritance* is a normative principle governing a fallible capacity, affectivism embraces the possibility that not all perceptions disclose value affectively. It is possible that either (1) an object stands in an axiological relation to a subject but their experience of that object fails to stand in the corresponding, apt axiological relation to the perceiver. In other words, perception's affective character is insensitive to value in a particular instance. Or (2), an experience has an affective character that *seems* to disclose the value of its object to the subject, but the object doesn't stand in the relevant axiological relation to the subject. Such a false affective appearance may be subjectively indistinguishable from an experience governed by inheritance, but nevertheless not governed by that principle.

§7 *Some metaethical upshots*

I have argued that an account on which perception discloses value affectively (as opposed to cognitively or not at all) can explain the unique profile of valence, being at one stroke both informative and motivating. *Inheritance* should be of interest not just to those who are interested in the epistemology and phenomenology of perception, but also metaethicists concerned with the source of objectivity for evaluative judgments.

Metaethical debunking arguments like Sharon Street's claim that our evaluative beliefs are not evolved to reflect normative truths and that there is no other empirically respectable explanation of how they could come to do so.¹⁸ The highly plausible hypothesis that perception involves epistemically significant evaluative content calls this into question, offering at least one robust empirical etiology for truth-tracking evaluative beliefs—perceptual valence.

¹⁸ Street, 2006.

Peter Railton argues for ethical naturalism by claiming that the non-moral good of an individual agent can be reduced to facts about what a cognitively idealized version of that person would desire on behalf of their actual self.¹⁹ Affectivism, though it is not a reductive naturalism, offers a sympathetic narrative: the objective ‘good-for’ an agent is a sensible feature of the world. Instead of appealing to a cognitively idealized agent’s desires, it appeals to an epistemic ideal that our perceptions seem to actually approach: that the non-moral good for an agent is perceived as good through perception’s affective character. In this respect it serves to explain why our desires are so often justified with respect to our objective benefit, and, consequently the appeal of Railton’s move.

Finally, I’ll mention that moral skeptics like J.L. Mackie claim, against the naturalist, that no natural feature of the world could be intrinsically motivating.²⁰ The affective character of perception seems to me to be an apt counterexample to Mackie’s claim.

References

¹⁹ Railton, 1986.

²⁰ Mackie, 1977.

- Aydede, M. (2000). An analysis of pleasure vis-a-vis pain. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61(3), 537–570.
- Aydede, M. (2009). Is feeling pain the perception of something? *The Journal of Philosophy*, 106(10), 531–567.
- Aydede, M., & Fulkerson, M. (2014). Affect: Representationalists' headache. *Philosophical Studies*, 170(2), 175–198.
- Aydede, M., & Fulkerson, M. (2018). Reasons and theories of sensory affect. In D. Bain, J. Corns, & M. Brady (Eds.), *The philosophy of pain: Unpleasantness, emotion, and deviance* (pp. XX–XX). Routledge.
- Bain, D. (2013). What makes pains unpleasant? *Philosophical Studies*, 166(1), 69–89.
- Bain, D. (2017). Evaluativist accounts of pain's unpleasantness. In J. Corns (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of pain* (pp. 40–50). Routledge.
- Bain, D. (2019). Why take painkillers? *Noûs*, 53(2), 462–490.
- Barlassina, L., & Hayward, M. K. (2019a). More of me! Less of me! Reflexive imperativism about affective phenomenal character. *Mind*, 128(512), 1013–1044.
- Barlassina, L., & Hayward, M. K. (2019b). Loopy regulations: The motivational profile of affective phenomenology. *Philosophical Topics*, 47(2), 233–261.
- Brady, M. S. (2015). Feeling bad and seeing bad. *Dialectica*, 69(3), 403–416.
- Brady, M. S. (2018). Painfulness, desire, and the Euthyphro dilemma. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 55(3), 239–250.
- Carruthers, P. (2018). Valence and value. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 97(3), 658–680.
- Carruthers, P. (2023). On valence: Imperative or representation of value? *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 74(3), 533–553.
- Cutter, B., & Tye, M. (2011). Tracking representationalism and the painfulness of pain. *Philosophical Issues*, 21(1), 90–109.
- Cutter, B., & Tye, M. (2014). Pains and reasons: Why it is rational to kill the messenger. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 64(256), 423–433.
- D'Arms, J., & Jacobson, D. (2000). Sentiment and value. *Ethics*, 110(4), 722–748.
- de Vignemont, F. (2023). Fifty shades of affective colouring of perception. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 101(1), 1–15.
- Dolnick, E. (2009). *The forger's spell: A true story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the greatest art hoax of the twentieth century*. HarperCollins.
- Fulkerson, M. (2020). Emotional perception. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 98(1), 16–30.
- González Arias, L., & Toribio, J. (n.d.). *Valenced encounters: Exploring the affective component of implicit attitudes* [Unpublished manuscript].
- Hall, R. J. (2008). If it itches, scratch! *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86(4), 525–535.
- Heathwood, C. (2007). The reduction of sensory pleasure to desire. *Philosophical Studies*, 133(1), 23–44.
- Helm, B. W. (2002). Felt evaluations: A theory of pleasure and pain. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39(1), 13–30.
- Hume, D. (1760). Of the standard of taste. In *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (New ed.). A. Millar.
- Jacobson, H. (2013). Killing the messenger: Representationalism and the painfulness of pain. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 63(252), 509–519.
- Jacobson, H. (2019). Not only a messenger: Towards an attitudinal-representational theory of pain. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 99(2), 382–408.
- Jacobson, H. (2021). The role of valence in perception: An ARTistic treatment. *The Philosophical Review*, 130(4), 481–531.
- Jacobson, H. (in press). On the very idea of valenced perception. *The Journal of Philosophy*.

- Kamardin, N. N., Shalanki, Y., Rozha, K. S., & Nozdrachev, A. D. (2001). Studies of chemoreceptor perception in mollusks. *Neuroscience and Behavioral Physiology*, 31, 227–235.
- Kant, I. (2000). *Critique of the power of judgment* (E. Matthews, Trans.; P. Guyer, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1790)
- Klein, C. (2007). An imperative theory of pain. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 104(10), 517–532.
- Klein, C. (2015). *What the body commands: The imperative theory of pain*. MIT Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2013). The relational nature of the good. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics* (Vol. 8, pp. XX–XX). Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. (2018). *Fellow creatures: Our obligations to the other animals*. Oxford University Press.
- Kraut, R. (2007). *What is good and why: The ethics of well-being*. Harvard University Press.
- Kraut, R. (2011). *Against absolute goodness*. Oxford University Press.
- Lin, E. (2017). Against welfare subjectivism. *Noûs*, 51(2), 354–377.
- Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*. Penguin Books.
- Martínez, M. (2011). Imperative content and the painfulness of pain. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 10, 67–79.
- Martínez, M. (2015). Pains as reasons. *Philosophical Studies*, 172(9), 2261–2274.
- Martínez, M. (2022). Imperative transparency. *Mind*, 131(522), 585–601.
- Martínez, M., & Barlassina, L. (2023). The informational profile of valence: The metasemantic argument for imperativism. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, XX(X), XX–XX.
- Mendelovici, A. (2013). Intentionalism about moods. *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy*, 2(1), 126–136.
- Millikan, R. G. (1995). Pushmi-pullyu representations. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 9, 185–200.
- Mitchell, J. (2024). Towards affective-evaluativism: The intentional structure of unpleasant pain experience. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 74(2), 693–717.
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. Basic Books.
- Railton, P. (1986). Moral realism. *The Philosophical Review*, 95(2), 163–207.
- Rossi, M. (2024). An evaluativist account of sensory pleasures. *Dialectica*, XX(X), XX–XX.
- Smith, M. (1994). *The moral problem*. Blackwell.
- Stear, N.-H. (n.d.). [Title of manuscript] [Unpublished manuscript].
- Street, S. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127(1), 109–166.
- Tappolet, C. (2016). *Emotions, value, and agency*. Oxford University Press.
- Theunissen, L. N. (2020). *The value of humanity*. Oxford University Press.
- Theunissen, L. N. (2025). Against the fundamentality of GOOD. *The Journal of Philosophy*, XX(X), XX–XX.
- Vogt, K. M. (2017). *Desiring the good: Ancient proposals and contemporary theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Walters, E. T., Carew, T. J., & Kandel, E. R. (2011). Nociceptive behavior and physiology of molluscs: Animal welfare implications. *ILAR Journal*, 52(2), 185–195.
- Walters, E. T. (2018). Nociceptive biology of molluscs and arthropods: Evolutionary clues about functions and mechanisms potentially related to pain. *Frontiers in Physiology*, 9, Article 1049.
- Werner, P. (n.d.). [Title of manuscript] [Unpublished manuscript].