

Valenced Experience and the Epistemology of Value

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The Question

Some experiences are positively or negatively valenced just in virtue of how they feel. For example:

- Feelings of pleasure and displeasure
- Feelings of attractive and aversive desire
- Feelings of positive and negative emotion

What is the epistemic role of valenced experience in justifying our beliefs about value?

A Perceptual Model

According to *the perceptual model*, valenced experience justifies belief about value in the same way that perceptual experience justifies belief about color, shape, and motion:

- (1) Valenced experience *represents value*: what makes an experience positively or negatively valenced is that it represents positive or negative value.
- (2) Valenced experience *justifies belief* about value by representing value: if your experience represents that an object *o* has evaluative feature *F*, then you thereby have some defeasible justification to believe that *o* is *F*.
- (3) Valenced experience justifies belief about value *non-inferentially*: your justification for belief about value doesn't depend on your justification to believe anything else, since it depends solely on your valenced experience.
- (4) Valenced experience justifies belief about value in a way that *blocks the epistemic regress*: it generates justification for beliefs about value without needing any justification itself.
- (5) Valenced experience represents value and justifies belief about value in virtue of its *phenomenal character* alone.

The perceptual model needn't claim that valenced experiences are *perceptual* representations of value so long as they represent value in some *quasi-perceptual* way that plays the same justifying role as perceptual experience.

A Problem for the Perceptual Model

Valenced experiences—unlike perceptual experiences—can be justified or unjustified depending on whether or not they are based on justifying reasons. For example:

Having recently been bitten by a rabid dog, I come to be afraid of all dogs including Fido. Nonetheless, I know that this fear of Fido is groundless, for even if he wanted to attack me (something I even now doubt very much given his calm, friendly disposition), he would be

unable to do so given his age, arthritis, and lack of teeth. Thus, although I know that Fido is in no way dangerous to me, I am still, irrationally, afraid. (Helm 2001: 41)

Against the perceptual analogy:

- There is some irrationality in the conflict between belief and recalcitrant emotion, e.g. it is somewhat irrational to fear things you believe are not dangerous. Moreover, in this case, the irrationality stems from your emotion, rather than your belief, since you know that Fido is not dangerous: your fear of Fido is irrational and unjustified.
- There is no such irrationality in the conflict between belief and recalcitrant perception, e.g. it is not at all irrational to experience the Müller-Lyer illusion when you know that the lines are equal in length. Unlike your emotional experience, your perceptual experience needs no justification, since it cannot be irrational or unjustified.

Some potential responses:

- Sabine Döring (2014) takes the hard line that there is no disanalogy with perception: she denies that emotions can be irrational or unjustified, but this doesn't fit with our ordinary practice of assessing emotions for rationality as well as accuracy.
- Christine Tappolet (2016) acknowledges the disanalogy but denies that it undermines the perceptual model. In reply, it entails that emotions cannot block the regress of justification, which threatens to undermine the justificatory power of emotion altogether.

My argument against the perceptual model:

- (1) Emotional experience is either justified or unjustified depending on whether it is based on justifying reasons.
- (2) If emotional experience is unjustified, it cannot generate justification for beliefs about value: otherwise, we get implausible *bootstrapping*.
- (3) If emotional experience is justified, it cannot generate justification for beliefs about value, but transmits justification from elsewhere: otherwise, we get implausible *double-counting*.
- (4) Either way, emotional experience cannot generate justification for beliefs about value, since it needs to be justified in the same way as your beliefs about value.

An Inferential Model

If emotions can be justified or unjustified, then what justifies them?

- (1) *The evidential principle*: An emotion is justified only by evidence that its object has the evaluative property that merits that emotion, e.g. fear of Fido is justified only by evidence that he is dangerous. (Compare Goldie 2004, Deonna and Teroni 2012, Brady 2013.)

What constitutes evidence that an object has an evaluative property?

- (2) *The reductive principle*: Evidence that an object has an evaluative property is reducible to evidence that it has non-evaluative properties that would constitute having that evaluative

property, e.g. evidence that Fido is dangerous reduces to evidence that he has sharp teeth and an aggressive personality, etc. (Compare Setiya 2012.)

We can now derive the following conclusion from these two principles:

- (3) *The combined principle*: An emotion is justified only by evidence that its object has non-evaluative properties that would constitute having the evaluative property that merits the emotion, e.g. fear of Fido is justified only by evidence that he has sharp teeth and an aggressive personality, etc. (Compare Deonna and Teroni 2012.)

This is an *inferential* model: your justification to believe that Fido is dangerous depends on your justification to believe that he has non-evaluative features that would make him dangerous.

There are many questions for the inferential model:

- Q1. What is the *form* of the inference?
- Q2. What is involved in the *psychology* of making the inference?
- Q3. Do *emotions* play any role in the psychology of making the inference?

A Problem for the Inferential Model

An argument against the inferential model:

- (1) The valenced experience of feeling aversion to the painful condition in your foot justifies believing that this condition is bad for you but without needing any justification itself.
- (2) The perceptual model can explain this: your valenced experience can justify believing that the painful condition in your foot is bad for you by *representing* that it is bad for you in a *quasi-perceptual* way that needs no justification.
- (3) The inferential model cannot explain this: it implies that your valenced experience cannot justify beliefs about value, since it must be justified in the same way as your evaluative belief – namely, by evidence that the painful condition in your foot has non-evaluative properties that make it bad for you.
- (4) Therefore, we should abandon the inferential model in favor of the perceptual model.

A metaphysical assumption: what makes the painful condition of your foot bad for you is not the fact that it feels *painful*, but rather the fact that you feel *aversion* to it. Compare: pain asymbolia.

An inferential model: your feeling of aversion to the painful condition justifies your evaluative belief that it is bad for you by justifying the non-evaluative belief that you feel aversion to it.

Against premise (3): your feeling of aversion to the painful condition is not justified in the same way as the belief that it is bad for you, since the evaluative belief is justified by the feeling of aversion, whereas the feeling of aversion cannot justify itself!

The Asymmetry Puzzle

Why do valenced experiences justify some beliefs about value but not others?

- Some valenced experiences justify beliefs about value without needing any justification themselves, e.g. feeling aversion towards the painful condition in your foot.
- Other valenced experiences cannot justify beliefs about value, since they need to be justified in the same way as evaluative beliefs, e.g. feeling afraid of a dog.

We cannot explain the asymmetry just by restricting the perceptual model so that it applies to some valenced experiences and not others, since the restriction needs explanation: is there any principled difference between the valenced experiences to which it does and doesn't apply?

Instead, we can explain the asymmetry by combining an inferential model of the epistemology of value with plausible assumptions in the metaphysics of value: some values are constituted by our valenced experiences, while others are constituted independently.

A Metaphysical Solution

Subjective values are constituted by valenced experience:

- What makes something *subjectively* good or bad for you is that you have—or you're disposed to have—some valenced experience, e.g. your feeling of aversion to the painful condition of your foot is what makes it bad for you.
- If your valenced experience makes something good for you, then the fact that it's good for you cannot be a justifying reason to have that valenced experience. Otherwise, valenced experience is *self-justifying*.
- We can now explain why some valenced experiences can justify beliefs about value without needing to be justified by those values: when your valenced experience constitutes some value, it cannot be merited by that value or justified by evidence of that value.

Objective values, in contrast, are constituted independently of valenced experience:

- What makes something dangerous is not the fact that anyone is disposed to fear it. Being dangerous is not merely being disposed to *elicit* fear, but *meriting* fear. Fear cannot provide evidence of danger, since it must be merited by danger and justified by evidence of danger.

More generally:

- A valenced experience justifies believing that an object has some evaluative feature when and only when the object has that evaluative feature in virtue of the fact that someone has or is disposed under suitable conditions to have that valenced experience.

Concluding Remarks

The perceptual model is designed to explain our justification for belief about objective values just as perception justifies our beliefs about objective properties, such as shape. Ironically, however, the perceptual model fares better with subjective values than objective values. This is an indication that perception is the wrong model of the epistemology of value: it gets the right results in some cases, but not for the right reasons. The inferential model provides a more promising approach.