

## Article

# Value Feelings: A Defense

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**Abstract:** The goal of this paper is to provide an initial defense of a neglected epistemology of value according to which a fundamental mode of access to evaluative facts and properties is constituted by a distinctive kind of feeling, sometimes called ‘value feeling’. The paper defends the appeal to value feelings against some objections that have been leveled against it, objections intended to show that it is a nonstarter. The paper argues that these objections can be met and that the view that there are such value feelings constitutes a reasonable hypothesis.

**Keywords:** emotions; feelings; value feelings; emotion theory; moral epistemology

## 1. Introduction

Ordinary thinking and talk often appeals to how things seem, feel, or strike us evaluatively speaking. Here are potential examples:

I feel that I have been disrespected.

I feel safe with you.

This seems/feels wrong.

This song strikes me as really beautiful.

Something about his remark does not feel right (e.g., after a potential microaggression).

I have a bad feeling about this.

I sense that there is something wrong going on with you. Is everything alright?

This looks like a dangerous place.

I have the sense that I have done something bad.

I feel that I have lost you.

Taken at face value, these statements point to a kind of experience that cues us to certain evaluative facts or states of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Typically, they ascribe an evaluative property to an object. This paper defends the claim that there is a kind of experience, sometimes called value feeling,<sup>2</sup> which is distinct from sensory perception and intuition as traditionally conceived (but which might have the same epistemic credentials). It is also distinct from emotions, though often confused with them. Most likely, it is *sui generis*.

Despite the fact that we seem to appeal to value feelings, the latter have been largely neglected in moral epistemology. The main defenders of value feelings come from the philosophy of emotion [1–3]. Value feelings are appealed to in the context of a certain dialectic in emotion theory, a move often discarded because of its seeming ad-hocness. If the view is virtually non-existent in moral epistemology, indeed, it might be for good reason. And accepting it would only signal theoretical bias.

I will argue that the view’s neglect in moral epistemology is unwarranted. That the view is virtually non-existent in epistemology is due to a blind spot rather than genuine reasons, a blind spot that a detour to the philosophy of emotion can help uncover. It will also imply that the move of appealing to value feelings in emotion theory is respectable.

In Section 2, I describe the dialectical context in emotion theory in which value feelings have been appealed to, and the objections that have been leveled against this appeal. In Sections 3 and 4, I argue that these objections can be met, and that there are in fact independent reasons—reasons independent from emotion theory—to take value feelings



**Citation:** Naar, H. Value Feelings: A Defense. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8040069>

Academic Editor: Robert Cowan

Received: 19 April 2023

Revised: 17 July 2023

Accepted: 18 July 2023

Published: 26 July 2023



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seriously. In Section 5, I discuss the possibility of arguing that what we have been calling value feelings are in fact emotions themselves. I conclude in Section 6.

## 2. From Emotion Theory to Epistemology

Contemporary philosophy of emotion contains a variety of views about what emotions are fundamentally. Among other things, emotions have been argued to be evaluative judgments (though, for well-known reasons, this view has been rejected by virtually everyone), evaluative perceptions or perception-like states, motivational states, and *sui generis* evaluative attitudes.

In recent years, however, a slightly more abstract debate has come to the fore. Many theorists take emotion to require or imply some kind of evaluation of its object, an evaluation which is often cashed out in representational terms and which is typically seen as distinct from evaluative judgment ([1,4,5], see [6] for dissent).<sup>3</sup> The point of contention is where to place the relevant evaluation. Some philosophers take emotions to be themselves evaluative representations. According to them, emotions constitute self-standing, ‘original’ representations of evaluative properties or state of affairs. Fear, on this sort of view, is a representation of danger that is not inherited from further mental states. The view—recently dubbed *receptivism* by Christine Tappolet [8]—takes emotions to be perception-like in being *receptive* when it comes to their relationship to value. They are—like messengers or emails—informational givens to which we can then respond or react.

It is instructive to characterize receptivity using John Bengson’s notion of *baselessness* [9]: emotions on the receptive view are baseless.<sup>4</sup>

Presentational states are baseless, in the sense that they are not consciously formed, by a subject, on the basis of any other mental state(s). In fact, presentational states are not states that one forms at all (. . .); rather, one simply has—or fails to have—them. (This provides a useful contrast with a merely representational state, such as belief, which is a type of state that can be formed.) When one enjoys a visual experience in which it looks as if there is a red apple on the table, one does not consciously form this experience on the basis of some other mental state: one scans the scene before one’s eyes, and it simply looks to one that this is so. [9] (p. 720)

Emotions, on the receptivist view, are then thought to have an epistemological significance similar to that of other presentational states such as perception. On a natural way to cash it out, emotions (e.g., fear) provide *prima facie*, defeasible epistemic justification for evaluative belief (e.g., the belief that *x* is dangerous).

Receptivism is contrasted with *reactivism* ([1,3,7,10]; cf. [11]). According to the view, emotions are not independent ways of registering evaluative states of affairs, but *reactions* to them, where this is thought to require some prior registering of these states of affairs.<sup>5</sup> They are like the reply to an email one has already received. They are precisely things we form on the basis of further mental states—they are not baseless. The connection between emotions and some of the background mental states they require is precisely that of basing.<sup>6</sup>

These days, this prior registering of value is thought to be non-doxastic, mainly because of problems of overintellectualization (see [4] (pp. 81–91) for discussion).<sup>7</sup> Following early phenomenologists such as Scheler and von Hildebrand, some philosophers have appealed to the notion of a value feeling (*Wertfühlen*) [1–3]. Value feelings are similar to sensory perception and intuition in being presentational, baseless states, but plausibly distinct from them. Historically, a value feeling is a *sui generis* type of acquaintance with an evaluative state of affairs [1] (p. 216), but we might see it as a distinctive, non-intellectual kind of intuition [6] (pp. 94–95).<sup>8</sup> Value feelings are the fundamental means by which we ‘sense’ value, just like visual experiences are the fundamental means by which we sense colors, in turn sharing sensory perception’s epistemic credentials. A receptivist view is thus true of value feelings.

According to many reactivists, value feelings provide the evaluative information necessary for us to respond or react with an emotion of a certain type.<sup>9</sup> Sensing the dangerous aspect of a situation—a value feeling—will lead to fear in certain subjects. In such a type of case, the subject is then said to react, or respond, to the danger.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, value feelings are typically thought to be distinct from sensory perception, intellectual intuition, and judgment or belief.

Not unsurprisingly, the claim that there are value feelings that constitute the evaluative ground of emotions has been met with some resistance. Three main problems have been raised against it. First, the move of appealing to a *sui generis* form of value awareness might seem ad hoc:

[I]f value [feelings] are regarded as a distinct *sui generis* type of mental state, then they just look ad hoc postulates introduced to resolve the present epistemological problem. [6] (p. 94)

A first criticism about this proposal is that the view might seem ad hoc. So far, we have seen that two prime candidates for the relevant pre-emotional evaluative state, namely evaluative judgment and perception, encounter problems. The defender of [reactivism] now turns to *sui generis* non-emotional value-feelings. But in doing so we are not being asked to entertain the possibility of an evaluative state which is tailored to support [reactivism]? And insofar as it is both non-doxastic and different from evaluative perception it might escape the criticisms made of those proposals. [4] (p. 88)

Second, we might think that we lack evidence for the existence of such value feelings:

Talk of value [feelings] similarly suggests a sort of immediate, quasi-perceptual acquaintance with evaluative properties. Yet, (...) no convincing evidence in favor of the existence of such a form of acquaintance has been adduced, and we are left in the dark about its nature. [6] (p. 94)

Third, value feelings might look like mysterious entities, very different from anything we are familiar with:

A (...) criticism is that the relevant state may seem mysterious, and therefore theoretically problematic. In general, we should avoid overpopulating our mental economies with theory-specific mental states; that is, mental states the positing of which is principally required to support a particular theory, and don't obviously serve any explanatory purpose in other contexts. We need reference to emotion, perception, and judgment in a range of personal-level psychological categorizations. Contrastingly, *sui generis* pre-emotional value-feelings don't look explanatorily indispensable and aren't obviously reflected in folk psychology. [4] (p. 88)

Regardless of the merits of the reactive theory,<sup>11</sup> its defense has led to a relatively neglected epistemology of value. The question is whether this epistemology can be satisfactorily defended against the objections leveled against it. I will argue that these objections can be met. Not only is the appeal to value feelings respectable in the context of defending a certain account of emotions; it constitutes an important basis for further investigation in other areas.

### 3. Forgetting Emotion Theory for a Moment: Motivating Value Feelings Independently

In this section, I tackle two objections against the proposal that there are value feelings: that the appeal to them is ad hoc and that we lack adequate evidence for the existence of value feelings. To see that the move is not ad hoc, we should ask ourselves whether there is independent evidence—i.e., evidence that is independent from the philosophy of emotion, and the debate over reactivism—for something like value feelings. The objections from ad hocness and lack of evidence can thus be answered together. I will argue that

adequate—theory-independent—evidence can be adduced, and thus provide *prima facie* reasons for moral epistemologists to take value feelings seriously.

That there is something like value feelings is a very natural view to hold even for those not engaged in emotion theory. Three sources of evidence can be adduced: linguistic, phenomenological, and explanatory.

First, we regularly use the language of feeling, seeming, and the like to express the way we apprehend a situation evaluatively speaking. We feel that something's wrong; it seems to us that we have been disrespected; a course of action feels right; an argument strikes us as fishy; we have a good (or bad) feeling about something. In all these cases, we seem to appeal to the presence of some quasi-perceptual state that cues us to some evaluative or normative property (or state of affairs) of our situation. And we do not refer to or name an emotion of a paradigmatic sort (fear, shame, admiration, anger, etc.) in any obvious way.<sup>12</sup>

Second, whatever we attempt to get at when saying that, e.g., something feels wrong seems to be something with a phenomenological profile. When I say this myself, I do seem to have a feeling that I would characterize as the feeling that something's wrong. Something about my situation just strikes me as wrong.<sup>13</sup> The same applies to the other reports. The feeling that I have been disrespected seems to be exactly what its linguistic expression reports: a *feeling*. This is how I feel: I feel that I have been disrespected.

Third, it is plausible that a value feeling—e.g., a feeling of danger—can both causally explain and rationalize an emotion (e.g., fear): it is because one senses/feels the danger that one is afraid, and it is in virtue of sensing/feeling the danger of one's situation that one can justifiably be afraid. The claim that value feelings and emotions are distinct entities can allow for plausible claims that an identification would block from the outset.

Taken at face value, these observations point to feelings—which some philosophers have called value feelings—that cue us to evaluative or normative aspects of the world. Of course, these observations are not sufficient to get us all the way to the claim that these feelings are *sui generis*. And astute philosophers might wish to redescribe these observations in a way that does not commit us to *sui generis* value feelings (for this strategy, see below). The claim that value feelings are *sui generis* does have some *prima facie* plausibility, however. As hinted at above, it is far from clear that we are referring to paradigmatic emotions (such as fear and anger) when employing talk of value feeling. Neither is it obvious that such value feelings are evaluative judgments or evaluative intuitions, so long as we regard the latter as purely intellectual.<sup>14</sup> There is reason, indeed, for construing value feelings as affective in some sense. After all, the language of feeling is used to refer to them.<sup>15</sup> It might be the case, furthermore, that value feelings have valence or hedonic tone. The feeling of being disrespected—if there is such a thing, and it qualifies as a feeling—might certainly feel bad in some way. If value feelings are affective, finally, they are not merely sensory, and so cannot be neatly reduced to ordinary perceptual states like visual states.

Regardless of whether one is moved by these considerations, notice that, at this stage, an epistemologist can certainly find the observations above compelling enough to take the view seriously. These observations provide some *prima facie* reason to think that we are honing in on a genuine phenomenon. So, we have some *prima facie*, pretheoretical evidence for the claim that there is a class of baseless state whose content is evaluative, but which is potentially distinct from sensory experience and purely intellectual intuition.

Crucially, an epistemologist not engaged in emotion theory can find the observations striking while not being tempted one bit to interpret them as being about emotions. The state referred to in the linguistic reports seems different from emotion. It is one thing to say that something feels wrong, or that we feel that we have been disrespected, another thing to say that we are afraid or angry. And it appears perfectly fine to think of oneself as feeling a certain way when, e.g., feeling that one has been disrespected, without thinking of oneself as undergoing any of the paradigmatic emotions (such as anger, resentment, or sadness). In fact, it seems to me pretty clear, from the inside, that the feeling that I have

been disrespected is different from any emotion—e.g., anger or resentment—that disrespect might bring about.

It is worth pointing out that the view that emotions are receptive evaluative states is not as popular in moral epistemology as it is in emotion theory. Outside of the philosophy of emotion, people are much less tempted to take emotions to be modes of awareness by which we access matters of significance. The epistemologist at issue here is going to be much less tempted to take value feelings to be emotions on a par with fear, anger, and sadness.

The foregoing gives some reason to take value feelings seriously. Still, we might think that value feelings are mysterious entities, since they do not seem to correspond to a folk category (Mitchell's objection above). I tackle this objection in the next section.

#### 4. The Analogy with Epistemic Feelings

Recall the objection that value feelings are mysterious entities. According to it, an appeal to value feelings fails to be parsimonious. Instead of appealing to this apparently new kind of mental state, we should appeal to mental categories reflected in folk psychology. And the thought is then that whatever role we might take value feelings to play (e.g., being a receptive, presentational state of value awareness), this role is in fact played by a perfectly ordinary kind of mental state (such as emotion). I will give two replies to this objection.

The first reply is that we *are* appealing to a perfectly ordinary category of mental state when we are appealing to value feelings—that of *feeling*. We are saying that the class of feelings contains a distinctive kind whose content is evaluative. The same observation applies if we decide to call the phenomenon at issue a value impression, a value seeming, and the like. Impressions and seemings are clearly things ordinary talk and thought is committed to. And the idea that these entities can have evaluative content is not obviously mysterious. Of course, it is an open question whether the category of feeling (and the like) is a fundamental one. Maybe value feelings are indeed reducible to some further kind of state. But this is not the issue here. The issue is whether an appeal to value feelings—feelings with evaluative content—departs from commonsense in a way that looks mysterious. To the extent that the proposal appeals to a perfectly ordinary sort of entity—feeling—it is not mysterious or unparsimonious in the way the objection states.<sup>16</sup>

The second reply claims that it does not really matter if we currently lack a clean category corresponding to the phenomenon we are trying to hone in on. What matters is that there is good reason for thinking that there *is* such a phenomenon. Recall how I have introduced the subject matter. I have observed that we often appeal to a kind of state with the hallmarks of a presentational, baseless state. This state, furthermore, is evaluative: it ascribes evaluative properties to certain objects. And since it is not obvious that this state is in fact a state of belief, desire, or emotion (or any other ordinary mental type), I have (following others in the literature) given it a label—'value feeling'—which is designed to capture the kind of state we are after: namely, a feeling with evaluative content.

Notice now that it does not matter how we want to call the phenomenon in question so long as we have reason to think that it exists and that it is not clear that it can be reduced to a phenomenon we are more familiar with. There are indeed reasons to take the term 'value feeling' to have a referent, and to take that referent to be a perfectly ordinary phenomenon. If we look at the description of a value feeling, there is nothing particularly mysterious about it.

In support of this reply, we can draw an analogy between value feelings and another class of feelings that has been postulated by philosophers and psychologists: epistemic (or cognitive) feelings. These include the feeling of uncertainty (about, e.g., something you are inclined to believe), the feeling of familiarity (e.g., when you go back to your hometown), the feeling of knowing (e.g., an answer to a question), the feeling of having forgotten something (e.g., after leaving your apartment), and the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon. Epistemic feelings are distinct from value feelings in that they concern the agent's own epistemic situation, while value feelings typically concern the value of some aspect of one's

external environment, where this value is often non-epistemic (e.g., danger, offense, loss). It might be the case that, e.g., the feeling of familiarity will count as a value feeling in my sense (which would be good news for the reactivist, as they could point to epistemic feelings as evidence for value feelings). But it is implausible that all value feelings—e.g., the feeling of danger towards a bear—are in fact epistemic feelings (i.e., feelings that concern one's own epistemic situation). For our purposes, an analogy will do.

Now, although the label 'epistemic feeling' (and other labels used in the literature) is far from ordinary, the phenomena it purports to refer to certainly are. We do have strong *prima facie* reasons to think that there is such a thing as the feeling of familiarity upon entering a place, or the feeling that one forgot something at home (while not quite knowing what). These are ordinary phenomena which have to do with one's sense of some aspect of one's own epistemic situation. That the general category of epistemic feeling is not part of folk psychology has not prevented people—both in philosophy and in empirical science—from investigating the phenomena it comprises.

Now, it might turn out that epistemic feelings are reducible to some other, more ordinary category—as we will see below, some take these feelings to be in fact emotions. But given that it is far from obvious that, e.g., the feeling of familiarity is in fact a kind of judgment, desire, emotion, or whatever, having a distinct label leaves room for further debate that would otherwise be blocked from the outset. Having a distinct label is all the more appropriate given that epistemic feelings are generally not posited in the context of any particular theoretical agenda. Approaching the phenomenon from a naïve perspective, as it were, the question of its ultimate nature should be left reasonably open.

I conclude that, far from being mysterious, value feelings—just as other categories such as epistemic feelings—constitute a category worthy of further investigation. And just like epistemic feelings, value feelings might not be reducible to some further kind of mental state—a fact reflected in our choice of label.

### 5. Could Value Feelings Still Be Emotions?

I have argued that value feelings are entities that we should take seriously, independently of the debate over the nature of emotions. The move of appealing to value feelings in emotion theory is, therefore, not *ad hoc*. And we have some reasons for thinking that there are such things as value feelings, and that *prima facie*, these feelings are different from other presentational, baseless states such as sensory perception and intuition. To make my case, I have partly relied on an analogy between value feelings and epistemic feelings. I have suggested that, just as it is acceptable to countenance and investigate the seemingly new category of epistemic feelings, it is acceptable to countenance and investigate the category of value feeling even if it is arguably not part of our ordinary way of making sense of each other.

Now, it is certainly possible to *argue* that what we have been calling value feelings are in fact emotions. For instance, what we might call the 'feeling of danger' might be argued to be fear itself. This is a move available to receptivists if they want to block the reactivist's appeal to value feelings. But notice the change of dialectical situation. The receptivist can no longer adopt a simple dismissive approach to value feelings, and by extension reactivism (so long as it is committed to the existence of separate value feelings). Instead, they must do some *work*. They must show that, contrary to appearances, what we are trying to get at when we are talking about value feelings are in fact the emotions themselves—in particular, those emotions that the reactivist takes to follow these value feelings. They must show that what the reactivist (and others moved by the foregoing, independent considerations) takes to be two things—one following the other—are in fact one and the same thing (an emotion). They must show that those who take value feelings to be distinct from emotions are double-counting.

To argue for the identification of value feelings with emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, etc.), receptivists must perform two important tasks. First, they must grapple with the independent considerations adduced in support of the claim that there are distinct,



potentially sui generis value feelings, by showing, for instance, that they are illusory, or that they can be reinterpreted in accordance with their own view. These include the following observations:

1. Linguistic reports of value feelings ('I feel disrespected by X') and linguistic reports of emotions ('I resent X') appear to have different subject matters. Saying that I feel disrespected by X seems to leave open what paradigmatic emotion (anger, sadness, etc.) I might be undergoing, or even whether I am undergoing any emotion.
2. Phenomenologically, feeling, e.g., disrespected seems different from, e.g., being angry or resentful.
3. Reports where value feelings causally explain and rationalize emotions ('Bobby is suddenly afraid because he sensed the danger') are intelligible.

Second, if they are to attempt to show that receptivism is superior to reactivism, they must give us reasons to accept their account of value feelings *without begging the question against the reactivist*. Just like, as we have seen, reactivists can do, receptivists must appeal to *independent* considerations—considerations that do not rely on a prior acceptance of their view—to defend their view. That receptivists must do this is revealed by the change in dialectical situation: now that reactivists can provide independent reasons to accept value feelings, their account of emotions is reinstated as a serious alternative to receptivism. Any rejection of it from the receptivist must thus rely on considerations that the reactivist can accept. A mere appeal to receptivist commitments won't do.

I leave it to the receptivist to find ways to reject or accommodate 1–3 in a way that is friendly to their view.<sup>17</sup> With respect to the second task, notice how difficult it would be to carry out. The task is not to show, on independent grounds, that value feelings are affective in some sense. Maybe they are. The task is to show, on independent grounds, that what we have been calling value feelings are in fact identifiable with paradigmatic emotions such as anger, guilt, fear, and sadness, and that reactivists are therefore wrong to appeal to distinct value feelings. None of the adduced considerations should appeal to the claim that emotions are modes of awareness of value, for this is precisely what reactivists are going to reject. Neither can receptivists appeal to controversial claims about putative features of emotions that reactivists are free to reject. As I will now argue, these constraints are difficult to satisfy.

This task has not been carried out—as we have seen, receptivists have contented themselves to making the three objections discussed earlier, thereby denying the existence of value feelings altogether. But it is instructive to go back to the analogy with epistemic feelings. In fact, epistemic feelings are customarily taken to be emotions, 'epistemic emotions' being an alternative label for phenomena such as the feeling of familiarity and the feeling of uncertainty. And the claim that epistemic feelings are affective states of some sort is certainly plausible [17]. But none of these observations is sufficient to establish the claim that epistemic feelings are emotions on a par with paradigmatic emotions such as sadness, fear, and anger. Epistemic feelings, indeed, might belong to the broader class of affective states without being emotions proper, and calling epistemic feelings 'emotions' might be loose talk. If we take the considerations in the previous section seriously, epistemic feelings certainly look different from paradigmatic emotions.<sup>18</sup>

Argument is thus needed to establish the claim that epistemic feelings are proper emotions (rather than affective or emotional states in some broader, or looser, sense). Now, the identification of epistemic feelings with emotions has been defended. But the considerations either rely on considerations which, when not question-begging against the reactivist, are insufficient to establish the identification of epistemic feelings with emotions, or else rely on controversial assumptions about emotions or assumptions that are controversial or beg the question against the reactivist.

For instance, Laura Silva has recently argued that epistemic feelings share a sufficient number of key features with paradigmatic emotions to count as emotions [20]. According to her, both emotions and epistemic feelings involve bodily feelings, they both display 'double intentionality' (they have both a material object and a 'formal' object), they both

have a characteristic phenomenology, they are both associated with behavioral tendencies, and they are both subject to fittingness conditions. Notice, however, that epistemic feelings and emotions could share all of these features while being distinct kinds of states. If the reactivist is right, after all, emotions are different from epistemic feelings in being *reactions* or *responses*, and epistemic feelings are different from emotions in being *baseless* in Bengtson's sense (see above). So, even if they might share the features Silva lists, they might have other features that make them mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, it is possible to resist particular claims to the effect that epistemic feelings and emotions share a certain feature. For instance, it might be the case that bodily feelings (or even feelings generally) are not essential to emotions, but mere accompaniments or manifestations [21], while epistemic feelings are always somatically realized. This is not to mention the fact that lots of feelings—including bodily feelings (e.g., feelings of bodily conditions)—are not emotions. Another place to resist the attribution of a common feature is the putative fact that emotions and epistemic feelings both have fittingness conditions. Presumably, the supposed fittingness conditions that apply to epistemic feelings should be understood in terms of representational accuracy: the feeling that a place is familiar is fitting just in case the place is really as the feeling represents to be, namely familiar. Notice, however, that a similar interpretation of the fittingness conditions of emotions is not only controversial, but also begs the question against the reactivist. The interpretation is controversial, as there are arguments to the effect that fittingness, and in particular the fittingness of emotions, should not be understood as accuracy, but normatively [22,23]. If this is right, then epistemic feelings and emotions might in fact be different in a crucial respect: only emotions are subject to genuine normative assessment. The interpretation is also question-begging in that it claims that emotions' connection to value is representational, a claim that the reactivist is going to reject. On their view, emotions are reactions or responses to value, as represented by a further mental state such as a value feeling. The reactivist can thus easily reject the claim that epistemic feelings and emotions are both, as Silva puts it, 'subject to rational evaluation'.<sup>19</sup>

Coming back to value feelings, the dialectical situation is similar: when arguing for a reduction of value feelings to emotions, receptivists are likely to point to features that they seem to share, features of the sort Silva gave in her argument. The problem is that these features are unlikely to favor a reduction if we keep in mind that the argument is supposed to address the reactivist. In this context, the reactivist is bound to find certain claims of similarity problematic, and more importantly, they are bound to think that there are important *differences* between value feelings and emotions, differences that *are* sufficient to declare them distinct. The only way to face the reactivist's appeal to distinct value feelings is therefore to go to the heart of reactivism itself and argue that it provides the wrong picture of emotions. Until then, the appeal to distinct, possibly *sui generis* value feelings constitutes a respectable move not only in the context of the debate with the receptivist, but also for moral epistemologists not engaged in emotion theory.

## 6. Concluding Remarks: Should We Believe in Value Feelings?

I have argued that the receptivist's objections to the reactivist's appeal to value feelings are inadequate, as there are reasonable independent grounds for countenancing value feelings. I have also argued that this has dialectical significance, as the receptivist must not only grapple with the observations motivating the existence of value feelings, but also do so in a way that does not beg the question against the reactivist. Along the way, I have argued that moral epistemologists without an interest in the philosophy of emotion should find value feelings worthy of investigation.

But there are a few things I have not done: I have not established the existence of value feelings, let alone *sui generis* value feelings. Neither have I given decisive reasons on behalf of the reactivist for opting for value feelings over some other candidate for the role of giving us this prior access to value. Perhaps purely intellectual evaluative intuitions, for instance, could do the work.



I have also not given a detailed treatment of the various cases of value feelings, including their content, phenomenological profile, and functional and potentially rationalizing role. Neither have I provided decisive empirical evidence for their existence. Instead, I have defended the introduction of what I take to be a reasonable hypothesis on the map of theoretical options in moral epistemology.

None of that, however, gives us any reason to dismiss the appeal to value feelings the way receptivists have done so far.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (project number: 516640754).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** I thank Konstantin Lowe, Sam Mason, Michael Milona, Neil Roughley, Daria Wunder, anonymous reviewers, the Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics research group at the University of Duisburg-Essen and an audience at the Toronto Metropolitan University for helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper. This paper is part of the project “The Normativity of Emotions” (516640754), generously funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These could be just properties, but if they are to justify judgment, they must have some kind of structured content.
- <sup>2</sup> If ‘feeling’ already evokes emotion in some readers, they are free to exchange it with the term ‘impression’ (see [1], p. 116).
- <sup>3</sup> In this paper, I assume the thesis that a certain kind of evaluative representation is necessary for emotion, the question then being when to locate this representation—receptivists claiming that it is the emotions themselves, reactivists claiming that it is a causal determinant of the emotions. One option for the reactivist is to argue that no evaluative representation is required, that emotions are direct responses to natural entities (e.g., the dog and his physical features), as accessed via non-evaluative representations. This is certainly a line one can take. For reasons for not taking it, see [7]. In the following, I will leave this option to the side, focusing on the viability of another option.
- <sup>4</sup> One complication is that emotions require background representational states—so-called cognitive bases [6]. In a sense, they are not baseless. But this worry is based on a misunderstanding of the notion. Intuitions (baseless states according to Bengson) require prior information in order to come to us. The Gettier intuition, for instance, is possible only after having registered the relevant description of the case. This would be like receiving an email as soon as the sender knows that we possess relevant background information. The email is a given we *receive* even if receiving it requires that we know certain things prior to receiving it. Emotions, on the receptive view, are baseless in a similar way.
- <sup>5</sup> Mitchell [4] thinks that emotions can be both ways of being aware of value and responses to value. For the claim that this combination of claims is difficult to maintain, see [12,13].
- <sup>6</sup> This is often cashed out in terms of responsivity to reasons. But given that the notion of a reaction presumably does not imply reasons-responsivity (a reaction can be reflex-like)—missiles and flowers react to changes in the environment—the reactivist view does not imply that emotions are necessarily formed for reasons. For an argument for the claim that emotions come in arational forms, see [14].
- <sup>7</sup> See [14] for a defense of a more intellectually demanding account for at least some cases. If one is not concerned with problems of overintellectualization, some versions of the judgmentalist theory claim that emotions are preceded by evaluative judgments rather than evaluative judgments themselves [15,16]. Although this view is generally rejected, reactivists are free to pursue it, and for one I think it is not as implausible as the literature makes it seem to be.
- <sup>8</sup> Here, I understand intuition as a purely intellectual kind of state. It might have cognitive phenomenology, but it does not have sensory or affective phenomenology. As we will see below, value feelings might be seen as affective in some sense.
- <sup>9</sup> Whether or not other types of evaluative cognition—e.g., evaluative judgment or intuition—can lead to or motivate emotion without the presence of a value feeling is an open question. It should be emphasized that the commitment to value feelings is not part of reactivism, and reactivists are free to reject it. To put my cards on the table, as a reactivist, I am not sure I would accept value feelings down the line. The goal of this paper is to show that a good initial case can be made for a claim some reactivists have put forward.
- <sup>10</sup> This sort of claim is often accompanied by the claim that the danger constitutes the subject’s reason for their fear. The notion of a response is thus the notion of something that implies sensitivity to reasons [1]. Although I am sympathetic to the claim that there

are reasons for emotions, and that we can be guided by these reasons in forming our emotions [10], I doubt that this is true of all emotions. Some emotions, it might seem, are mere reactions rather than the work of a rational subject [14].

Which is, strictly speaking, not a full theory. All the reactive theory says is that emotions are responses or reactions to value, as represented by some distinct mental state. This leaves open the question of what kind of response or reaction emotions are. This is where various standard views in emotion theory—motivational, feeling, sui generis, etc., views—can come back to the fore. In principle, one could maintain a judgmentalist theory according to which emotions are evaluative judgments that arise out value feelings, on the model of the relationship between perceptual judgment and sensory perception.

I am assuming that reactivism (just like receptivism) is a theory about entities such as fear, anger, shame, sadness, etc.—what I call ‘paradigmatic’ emotions. Reactivists commonly claim that these entities are responses to value, where this value is represented by some distinct mental state. And some reactivists claim that value feelings are this distinct state, where value feelings are conceived as ‘receptors’ of value (just like emotions as conceived of by receptivists) rather than responses to value. One could claim that value feelings are still emotions even given reactivism, but this would blur the distinction between receptive states and responsive states. Even if the reactivist is happy to claim that value feelings are in some sense emotions (perhaps there are in some sense affective), they still would insist that they have a very different nature from emotions such as fear and sadness (which is what their theory is about).

On the ‘striking’ locution, see [2].

One might take evaluative intuitions to be all the reactivist needs here. The problem with this suggestion is that the notion of an evaluative intuition has been received with skepticism in emotion theory. Although I do find intuitionism plausible, the goal of this paper is to show that the view that there are value feelings does not face the problems that have been so far raised against it. It is certainly not to conclusively show that there are such feelings and that they are distinct from everything else in our mental economy.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the fact that we may sometimes use the language of feeling to express a cognitive state. This is all the more plausible when the state in question is propositional. For instance, one might say that one feels that the weather will be good tomorrow. In such a case, although one might not be expressing a belief proper, one might be expressing a hunch or intuition. Whether and when the language of feeling should be taken at face value is a difficult question, but notice that while it might be argued that it should not in cases where one expresses a propositional state, it is more difficult to do the same in cases where the state appears objectual (feeling of being disrespected). Perhaps the notion of value feelings should be confined to feelings of value rather than alleged feelings with propositional content. I leave this issue to the side in what follows. Another issue concerns the possibility that apparent reports of value feelings might in fact refer to emotions. For instance, when I say that I feel/sense the danger, I might be in fact talking about my fear. Nothing I say in the paper gives conclusive reason to reject this possibility. The claim in the text is that there is nothing obvious about it, and that denying it is a live option for the reactivist.

One might reply that the objection is that the appeal to sui generis value feelings is unparsimonious and mysterious. But there is nothing mysterious in thinking that a certain kind of state is irreducible. One might take emotion to be sui generis—there is nothing mysterious in thinking that it is fundamental. Of course, the view that value feelings are sui generis will appear unparsimonious to those who think that they either do not exist or can in turn be reduced. The goal of this paper is to show that a good initial case can be made for the view that there are such feelings, at least if we are not too engrossed in the debate over receptivism and reactivism in the philosophy of emotion.

See, e.g., [4] (pp. 88–90) for a redescription of the phenomenological observation that is friendly to the receptivist view.

Some theorists have explicitly denied that epistemic feelings are emotions (e.g., [18,19]).

To be fair, Silva’s argument is not intended to engage with reactivism. In the context in which she works, emotions are already assumed to be receptive states with epistemological significance. From a perspective internal to receptivism, it should be clear that the view that epistemic feelings are emotions looks particularly plausible. My goal here is to show that, factoring in independent considerations and reactivism, the identification should look very controversial.

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