

SENTIMENTALIST NORMATIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM

Construtivismo normativo sentimentalista

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Abstract: I articulate a new constructivist approach to the problem of the normativity of moral demands that provides a middle ground between Kantian and Humean constructivism. This approach combines a modest form of normative constructivism with neo-sentimentalism about virtues. I hold that it can plausibly avoid the Humean claim that the normativity of moral demands is completely contingent upon an agent's valuing attitudes without embracing the ambitious Kantian project of deriving moral content from practical reason as such. The argument to be developed is this: (1) every normative judgment entails a partial description of virtue; (2) the neo-sentimentalist account of virtue imposes substantial constraints on the conception of virtue an agent can coherently uphold; (3) that provides us with a coherence test for valuing patterns and (4) it is possible to show that valuing patterns that violate recognizable moral constraints fail this test. The conclusion is that certain moral constraints follow, on pain of incoherence, from the standpoint of any affective agent that evaluates other agents in terms of virtue and vice.

Keywords: constructivism; normativity; virtue; sentimentalism; approval.

Resumo: Artigo uma nova abordagem construtivista do problema da normatividade das demandas morais que fornece um meio-termo entre o construtivismo kantiano e o construtivismo humeano. Essa abordagem combina uma forma modesta de construtivismo normativo com uma teoria neo-sentimentalista da virtude. Sustento que esta abordagem pode evitar a tese humeana de que a normatividade de demandas morais depende das atitudes valorativas contingentes de um agente, sem aceitar o projeto kantiano ambicioso de derivar conteúdo moral da razão prática como tal. O argumento a ser desenvolvido é o seguinte: (1) todo juízo normativo implica uma descrição parcial da virtude; (2) a concepção neo-sentimentalista de virtude impõe restrições substanciais à concepção de virtude que um agente pode sustentar coerentemente; (3) isso nos fornece um teste de coerência para padrões de valoração e (4) é possível mostrar que padrões de valoração que violam certas restrições morais falham nesse teste. A conclusão é que certas restrições morais se seguem, sob pena de incoerência, da perspectiva prática de qualquer agente afetivo que avalia outros agentes em termos de virtude e vício.

Palavras-chave: construtivismo; normatividade; virtude; sentimentalismo; aprovação.

Introduction: Modest Constructivism

According to Normative Constructivism the truth of a normative statement consists in the fact that it follows from the practical point of view of an agent (Street, 2012, p. 40).

The idea can be developed along the following lines. An agent starts with a given practical perspective. This perspective is composed by the set of normative and evaluative attitudes the agent endorses. This perspective is then transformed via a “construction procedure”. The result is a practical perspective that is normatively authoritative for the agent. We can understand the claim that a normative statement follows from the practical perspective of an agent as the claim that a commitment to it figures in the perspective that is authoritative for that agent.

In order to deliver determinate conclusions about what follows from the practical perspective of an agent, any constructivist account has to describe the constraints to which the construction procedure is subjected. That is, requirements of practical rationality to which an authoritative practical perspective must conform. Constructivists disagree on how to characterize these requirements.¹ Here, we will be concerned with the version of constructivism that restricts them to the minimal requirements of synchronic consistency, i.e., requirements of logical and instrumental coherence.

Constructivists are divided as to whether these minimal requirements have substantive consequences. Kantian constructivists (such as Korsgaard, 1996, 2009) maintain that, given the formal requirements of rationality, certain substantive moral conclusions follow from any practical perspective, independently of what are the substantive commitments that constitute it. That is, normative truths corresponding to moral demands can be constructed from any practical perspective. Humean constructivists (such as Street, 2012) deny this claim. According to Humean constructivism, every normative truth is contingent on the substantive normative commitments of the agent in question.

If successful, Kantian constructivism would vindicate the objective normativity of moral demands while staying clear of the metaphysical and epistemic commitments associated with normative realism. Few philosophers, however, have been convinced that this Kantian project can ever be made to work.²

However, contrary to what some have suggested (Street, 2010, p. 370), we should not assume that the failure of the Kantian project forces constructivists to accept the Humean

¹ For a discussion see Schafer (2015).

² Cf. Gibbard (1999), FitzPatrick (2005) and Street (2012).



view.

Both Kantians and Humeans characterize the agents that are the subject of the constructivist approach (call them “c-agents”) in terms of a set of commitments and one particular capacity: practical rationality. As such, they agree that shared moral reasons, if there are any, must be derived either from the structure of that capacity or from shared contingent attitudes.

However, there is no reason why the c-agents should be characterized only in terms of that generic capacity for practical reasoning. Suppose we add to the characterization of the c-agents other capacities, abilities or activities. That may add further constraints on the practical perspective of the c-agents. And suppose further that by combining these constraints with the minimal requirements of rationality, it should prove possible to derive certain moral truths from the practical perspective of any such agent, regardless of their contingent attitudes. That would be a significant result. It would show that, for that particular kind of agent, moral demands are non-contingently binding.

If it could be made to work, this view would provide an alternative to extant versions of Kantian and Humean constructivism. On the one hand, it would concede to the Humean that moral truths do not follow from the perspective of any conceivable rational agent. On the other hand, it would not concede the point that the set of agents to whom moral reasons apply can only be characterized in terms of certain shared contingent evaluative commitments and attitudes. Rather, it would hold that moral reasons can be derived from a more robust conception of the c-agents that, while not trivial, is not characterized in terms of substantive moral commitments.

I refer to this kind of constructivism as modest constructivism (Vogelmann, 2025). It is modest in the sense that it tempers, but does not abandon the Kantian aim of showing that moral reasons are non-contingently normative.

The goal of this paper is to articulate a defense of a particular version of modest constructivism. This view enriches the characterization of c-agents in two ways. First, c-agents are not only endowed with practical reason, but also evaluate other agents in terms of virtue and vice. Second, it assumes that these assessments reflect the agent’s affective responses to its peers. That is, it assumes that a form of sentimentalism about virtue is true of c-agents.

My defense of this view will bring together a number of argumentative strands, some of which have been developed more thoroughly elsewhere (Vogelmann, 2024a, 2024, 2025). Due to space limitations, the presentation of some of these arguments will be more



schematic than they ought to be and often referred to other papers. The main goal here is not to offer a full defense of these claims, but rather to show how a number of independently plausible theses can come together to support the rather controversial claims of modest constructivism.

Two main ideas drive the argument. The first is the view, discussed in section 2, that there is a strong connection between the normative judgments an agent endorses and their conception of virtue. In particular, that normative judgments imply a partial description of how perfectly virtuous agents behave. The second is the claim that a sentimentalist account of virtue imposes substantive restrictions on the judgments of virtue an agent can consistently endorse. A combination of these two claims entails that sentimentalism about virtue imposes substantive restrictions on the normative judgments one can consistently endorse.

Whether these restrictions allow for the derivation of moral reasons will depend on the details of the sentimentalist account of virtue. In section 3, I will outline a neo-sentimentalist account of virtue judgments that is up to the task. Neo-sentimentalists hold that evaluative judgments are about the appropriateness of affective responses. On this approach, virtue judgments can be understood as judgments about the appropriateness of an associated feeling of approval. The main challenge to this view is to characterize these feelings in a non-circular and informative fashion. I will argue that an Ecological Perceptual Theory of affective responses (that brings together the main insights of the Perceptual and Motivational theories of emotions that extant versions of neo-sentimentalism mobilize) allows us to do just that.

Finally, in section 4, I pull all the strands of the argument together to show how a minimal, but rather central, moral demand for what I call weak reciprocity can be derived from the practical perspective of any c-agent.

Should this argument succeed, it will illustrate the fact that, contrary to what one might expect, the combination of constructivism and sentimentalism can lead not to rampant relativism but to the defense of a limited kind of objectivity for moral demands.

2. A Coherence Test for Valuing Patterns

To defend modest constructivism, we must show that, for at least some moral reasons, the practical perspective of any suitably characterized c-agent that violates or fails to acknowledge those reasons also violates a minimal formal requirement of rationality. That amounts to showing that, for that particular kind of agent, any possible authoritative



perspective involves a commitment to those reasons and, correspondingly, that they can be derived from the practical perspective of any c-agent. *Sentimentalist Constructivism* is the version of modest constructivism that characterizes c-agents as (i) agents that evaluate other agents in terms of virtue and vice and (ii) agents whose judgments of virtue and vice reflect (in some manner to be specified) their affective reactions to other agents. In this section I will outline a defense of this view.

My defense is grounded on the view that there is a close connection between the normative judgments we endorse and the conception of virtue to which we commit ourselves. Despite the severe criticism this thesis has received³, it can be defended (Vogelmann, 2024a).

The basic premise of the argument for this view is the claim that if an agent has a decisive reason to act, is aware of the relevant facts, and fails to respond to that reason, then she exposes herself to some form of personal criticism that explains her failure to respond to that reason. I take this to be an expression of the normativity of reasons. Decisive reasons determine what an agent should do. And if an agent does not act as she should, that shows that there is something wrong with her - she is not as she should be. The second premise is the claim that a perfectly virtuous agent is irreproachable. A perfectly virtuous agent is someone who does not exhibit the kind of imperfection that could explain a failure to respond to a decisive reason. It follows that a perfectly virtuous agent (and one who is not ignorant of any relevant facts) always acts as she should and for the right reasons.

Now, suppose I hold that, in circumstances C, fact R gives me a perfect⁴ decisive reason to do A. This normative judgment commits me to the claim that if I were perfectly virtuous, I would do A in C for reason R. For (i) given that the reason is not based on a character flaw, I would have that reason even if I were perfectly virtuous, and (ii) if I were perfectly virtuous, I would act according to my reasons. If we assume that the ideal of virtue that applies to me applies equally to all agents, the judgment that I have a perfect decisive reason to do A in C commits me to the claim that any virtuous agent would do A in C. That is, the normative judgment commits me to a partial description of how perfectly virtuous

³ Cf Williams (1995).

⁴ By perfect reason, I mean a reason to act that is not predicated on any character flaw in the agent. Imperfect reasons are predicated on character flaws. For example, if I know that I am intemperate and that I may be unable to control my appetites in certain circumstances, I may have reasons to avoid putting myself in those circumstances (Williams, 1995, p. 190). This is an imperfect reason based on my intemperance. In contrast, the fact that someone needs help in an emergency is a perfect reason to help, because it is not based on any character flaw in the agent.

agents would behave in those circumstances.

This claim is the starting point in our defense of *Sentimentalist Constructivism*:

(Connection) The normative judgment that, in circumstances C, fact R gives person P a perfectly decisive reason to do A, commits the speaker to the claim that any perfectly virtuous agent would do A in C.

This claim allows us to test normative judgments against our conception of virtue. If I judge that I have reason to be cruel in order to gain personal advantage, I am committed to the claim that if I were perfectly virtuous, I would act in a cruel manner. But if my conception of a virtuous agent is that of an altruistic, kind agent, then I cannot accept this implication and must reject the normative judgment in question on pain of incoherence.

Given *Connection*, we can restrict the set of normative judgments an agent can consistently endorse by imposing substantive restrictions on her conception of virtue.

Suppose that we accept the following claim:

(Supposition) An agent's conception of virtue reflects their values: patterns of behavior that violate these values are considered vicious; patterns that synergize with these values are considered virtuous.

The combination of *Connection* and *Supposition* allows us to set up a coherence test for values. It is widely accepted that our normative judgments about reasons for action reflect our values⁵. If that is the case and *Supposition* is true, then our values are reflected both in our evaluation of other agents and in our normative judgments. But, according to *Connection*, each of our normative judgments commits us to a partial conception of virtue. If a valuation pattern simultaneously produces a conception of virtue and a normative judgment that, in turn, implies an incompatible conception of virtue, then that valuation pattern is internally incoherent.

Consider, for example, an agent who values her own interests but does not value the interests, life, or physical integrity of others. This is a recognizably immoral valuation pattern. If an opportunity to advance her interests at the expense of others were to present itself, that agent would find perfect and decisive reasons to seize that opportunity (assuming her other values are not harmed by this choice). Still assuming she accepts that the ideal of virtue that applies to her is the same as that which applies to her peers, this normative judgment implies that any perfectly virtuous agent would behave in that manner in those

⁵ See, for instance, Scanlon (1998, p. 95), Parfit (2011, p. 38-39) and Street (2012, p. 43-44).

circumstances. That is, this agent is committed to a picture of virtue according to which virtuous agents are *predatory*. Her values, however, paint a different picture of virtue. Given *Supposition*, and given that this agent values her own interests, she will perceive agents who harm her interests as vicious. This agent is committed, then, to the idea that virtuous agents are predatory, but at the same time, in light of her values, she perceives predatory agents as vicious. There is an incoherence in her practical perspective.

The only way to correct the incoherence is by changing her valuation pattern in such a way that it would no longer ground predatory reasons. If the agent did not value her own interests, the aggressor would not seem vicious to her. But she would also find no reason to act predatorily. To the extent that she values her own interests, she could only restore coherence by assigning a certain value to the interests and well-being of others (at least as a limit on her own actions). If that is the case, she will be committed to the claim that the value of others gives her at least a reason not to act predatorily and, consequently, to the claim that virtuous agents would not act in this way.

Similar arguments could be construed with respect to other values. If this line of reasoning is correct, then the connections identified between the notions of value, normative reasons, and virtue impose a certain structure on the practical outlook of any c-agent. At the very least, these connections demand a *weak form of reciprocity*. If I value my life, happiness, ends, and freedom, then I must acknowledge at least a reason not to violate or harm the life, happiness, ends, and freedom of others. I must, at the very least, acknowledge their value as a limit to my own actions. Otherwise, my practical perspective will be incoherent. I will refer to values that ground only negative reasons (that is, reasons *not* to harm or violate) as *negative values*.

The combination of *Connection* and *Supposition* allows for a defense of modest constructivism. Certain substantive restrictions can be derived from the practical perspective of any agent with respect to whom both theses are true. *Supposition*, however, is a controversial claim. In what follows, I will argue that it can be defended, if suitably qualified, by appeal to a form of sentimentalism about virtue.

3. Virtue Sentimentalism

Neo-sentimentalism is the view that evaluative concepts are best understood as involving an assessment of the appropriateness of an associated affective response. According to neo-sentimentalism, the relation between evaluative concepts and the corresponding responses can be articulated in the form of the following biconditional:



(NS) x has value V if, and only if, the affective response E is appropriate with respect to x⁶

In order to understand Neo-sentimentalism, it is crucial to explain what it is for a response to be appropriate. On one possible interpretation, appropriateness is a normative concept. An appropriate emotion is one that ought to be felt or one we have (all things considered) normative reason to feel.

The resulting *Normative Neo-Sentimentalist* is vulnerable to the *Wrong Kind of Reason* objection (see D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000 and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004) The problem is that a number of different considerations bear on whether you should or should not exhibit a certain affective response but many have no bearing on whether the object of the response has the corresponding evaluative property. For instance, you may have decisive prudential reasons not to be enraged by your boss' impertinent regards, but that does not make them less offensive. And the fact that you will starve if you do not eat human flesh may be a good reason not to be disgusted by it, if you can help it, but not one that bears on whether it is actually disgusting (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 18). In both cases, even though you have an overall reason not to exhibit a particular affective response, that response is still, according to neo-sentimentalism, appropriate. Therefore, in order to be plausible, neo-sentimentalism must offer an account of appropriateness for affective responses that allows us to differentiate between considerations that are relevant and irrelevant for assessing whether something has the associated value.

An alternative favored by some neo-sentimentalists is to account for the notion of emotional appropriateness in terms of the notion of emotional appraisal. It is widely accepted that emotions involve an appraisal of their object. In experiencing fear, for instance, we negatively appraise its object as fearsome. An option available to neo-sentimentalists is to say that an emotion is fitting when its object really is as the emotion appraises it (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2023, p. 137; Tappolet, 2016, p. 87).

In order for this kind of *Appraisal Neo-Sentimentalism* to be complete, it needs to be supplemented with a theory of emotional appraisal. That theory must explain what emotional appraisal is and how we can specify the appraisal of particular emotions. In section 3.1, I discuss two theories of appraisal that have been put forward by sentimentalists: the Perceptual Theory and the Motivational Theory. Both theories assume a representational

⁶ Cf. Tappolet (2016, p. 85) and D'Arms and Jacobson (2000, p. 729 and 2023, p. 13).

view of perception. In section 3.2 I will argue that the main insights of both theories can be preserved by a perceptual theory that mobilizes a non-representational account of perception. Finally, in section 3.3, I will apply this perceptual theory to feelings of approval and disapproval. The result, I argue, is a plausible neo-sentimentalist theory of virtue.

3.1. *Perceptual and Motivational Theories of Emotions*

Neo-sentimentalists need a theory of emotional appraisal. A promising option is provided by Tappolet's Perceptual Theory of emotions. According to this view, emotions are perceptual experiences of evaluative properties. Contrary to full-blown perceptions, perceptual experiences are not taken to be factive (Tappolet, 2016, p. 15). When one has a non-factive perceptual experience of an evaluative property it *seems* to one that the object of the experience has some particular value – even though it may not actually have it. This kind of experience can be aptly described, then, as an *appearance of value*.

According to Tappolet, perceptual experiences have representational content. Emotions are taken to represent their objects as having specific evaluative properties (Tappolet, 2016, p. 15). What differentiates this view from traditional cognitive theories that take appraisal to be evaluative judgments is the fact that according to the perceptual theory, the representational content of emotions is non-conceptual (Tappolet, 2016, p. 16). Appraisals, on this view, are non-conceptual representations of evaluative properties (Tappolet, 2016, p. 19).

Combining this view with appraisal neo-sentimentalism, however, leads to a hopelessly circular view. On this account, an appraisal represents the emotion's object as having a specific evaluative property. The emotion is appropriate if the object actually has that property. The result is that (NS) is reduced to the claim that something has an evaluative property if, and only if, it has that property (Tappolet, 2016, p. 99) – a vacuous and uninformative claim.

A further problem for the perceptual theory concerns the motivational role of emotions. Emotional episodes exhibit what Frijda (1986, p. 78) calls control precedence: “they prioritize a goal and impel its pursuit in ways that often exceed the agent's considered view of its importance” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 105). That can also be true of recalcitrant emotions. On Tappolet's view, cases of recalcitrant emotion are cases in which there is a conflict between an appearance of value and our considered judgment. The problem is, however, that in ordinary cases, an “appearance at odds with considered judgment does not normally lead to behavior incompatible with that judgment” (D'Arms &



Jacobson, 2023, p. 110). Even as the stick in the water continues to look crooked to me, for instance, my behavior is guided by the judgment that it is straight. And it is not clear that things should be different when it comes to appearances of value. In particular, it is not clear why appearances of value should exhibit control precedence (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 110).

The Motivational Theory put forward by D'Arms and Jacobson aims at addressing both problems. According to it, each emotion is a “psychological kind, episodes of which are unified by their common motivational structure” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 106). Each emotion is characterized in terms of a generic goal it prioritizes and a more specific action tendency: “the especially direct and urgent means of goal satisfaction they favor” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 105).

The motivational theory immediately explains the motivational role of emotions. Its account of emotional appraisal is more complex. According to this theory, emotions have no representational content. The characterization of an emotion's appraisal is not taken as a characterization of a thought or representation that goes through the emoting agent's mind, but rather as “an external description of how the agent should be understood” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 139). An emotion appraises the object not because it involves an evaluative representation, but because “someone having an emotional episode thereby takes its object as good or bad in a specific way” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 140). A theorist *gloss* of the emotional appraisal is an interpretation of what way that is. That is, the formulation of the generic appraisals of emotion types are “interpretive claims that offer a gloss of how someone in the grip of a natural emotion is best understood as appraising its object” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 142). That gloss provides a standard of fit for that emotion type.

The claim is that by being motivated, the emoting agent thereby displays a concern. Some things “are of concern to humans because of our common emotional propensities” (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 7). And, for the concerned being, things acquire a certain significance on virtue of how they bear on that concern. The general gloss put on the appraisal of the emotion is a description of the significance of the features of the environment that the emotion is tracking (not a description of how emoting agents represent those features to themselves).

To illustrate briefly, consider shame and pride. The object of both emotions is paradigmatically something personally connected to the agent (one's appearance, one's deeds, one's talent or incompetence). Shame's distinctive action tendency is the



concealment of that object from public attention. Pride's distinctive action tendency is display.⁷ They regard "how one presents oneself to others". As such they "reflect an inherent concern for being viewed favorably (or at least not unfavorably)" (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 146). Shame and pride, therefore, embody a concern with the way one is perceived by others. In light of those observations, it makes sense to gloss the appraisal of shame and pride in terms of what *reflects badly on me* and what *reflects well on me*. The claim is that this gloss captures the meaningful way in which the objects of shame and pride bear on the concern that an agent in the grip of those emotions thereby displays. In that sense, it describes the significance of the features of the environment that the emotion is tracking.

This account of emotional appraisal provides informative criteria of appropriateness for an emotion. For instance, rather than simply claiming that shame is appropriate when its object is shameful, it holds that shame is appropriate when its object actually reflects poorly on the agent. As such, the motivational theory can avoid the circularity problem that plagued Tappolet's perceptual theory.

The victory of the motivational theory over the perceptual theory is not complete, however. The motivational theorist's claim that an emotion is not appropriate does not amount to the claim that the behavior it motivates is unadvisable or uncalled for by the situation. If that were the case, the view would be vulnerable to the Wrong Type of Reason objection. Rather, the claim is that an agent in the grip of an emotion, "thereby takes its object as good or bad in a specific way" (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 140). The emotion does not motivate as a blind impulse. Rather, an agent in the grip of the emotion can be (correctly) described as responding to the apprehension of a value – she "takes" the object as good or bad. That apprehension is not an evaluative judgment or thought. But what is it? The motivational theory does not seem to have an answer. It is reduced to appealing to an unexplained notion of taking something as good or bad. The perceptual theory has an answer: to say that the emoting agent takes the object of the emotion as good or bad in a specific way is to say that it *seems* good or bad to her. That suggests that perhaps the motivational theory cannot, after all, do without the notion of an appearance of value.

3.2. *An Ecological Perceptual Theory*

Both the Perceptual and the Motivational Theory seem to presuppose a model of

⁷ For a richer, empirically informed description of shame's action tendencies, eliciting patterns and phenomenological features, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2023, p. 143-146).

cognition that isolates perception from action.⁸ While that presupposition is staple of representationalist conceptions of perception (see Hurley, 2001), it is challenged by a number of non-representationalist theories. In this section, I will argue that adopting a non-representationalist account of perception allows us to accommodate the main observations that motivate the Motivational Theory while preserving the main insight of the Perceptual Theory – namely, that emotions present their objects in a value-laden way. In particular, I will focus on the ecological theory of perception that derives from Gibson's *Ecological Psychology* (2015).

According to Gibson, perception is the process of picking up ecological information to discriminate affordances. Ecological information consists of energetic patterns in the environment that correlate with objects or events. An affordance is a possibility for action provided by the environment. Perception is the capture of ecological information that specifies which actions are available to the organism.

Crucially, for Gibson, this process does not require internal representations. Because the environment is rich in ecological information, there is no need to construct internal models to supplement sensory input. By actively exploring the environment, the organism can capture sufficient information to guide behavior directly. Thus, perception is non-representational (Chemero, 2009, p. 23).

The detection of ecological information always serves the practical purpose of guiding action. As Scarantino (2003, p. 953) notes, for Gibson “to perceive is to pick up information for purposes of behavioral discrimination (rather than for purposes of belief fixation)”. Hence, perception is always perception of affordances. As Gibson puts it, to perceive something is to perceive how to approach it and what to do with it (Gibson, 2015, p. 213). That is not to say our perceptual states represent affordances. Rather, the point is that by detecting ecological information the organism is able to identify the possibilities of action that are available to it and guide its behavior accordingly. Perception just is that process of discriminating affordances. And, for that reason, to perceive an element of the environment is to perceive its affordances.

Theorists in the tradition of *Ecological Psychology* emphasize that an agent is always faced with a rich landscape of affordances (Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014). There is always an immense variety of affordances available in the environment. An agent simply cannot discriminate all the available affordances and acting on most of them would result in

⁸ Cf. Tappolet, 2016, p. 64-65; D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 110

irrelevant and meaningless behavior. In order to produce adaptive behavior, the agent must be able to selectively respond only to the relevant affordances out of all the possibilities for action. And, for that to be the case, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the affordances that bear on that agent's needs and concerns must appear as particularly relevant. Second, the agent must be prone to respond to those affordances – they must have a motivational grip on him. Affordances that satisfy these two conditions are perceived not as mere possibilities for action, but as *solicitations* (Dreyfus and Kelly 2007). They invite or call for a certain action. In particular, the perception of solicitations generates bodily states of action readiness (Rietveld *et al.*, 2018, p. 52; Frijda, 1986; Frijda *et al.*, 2014). When perceiving a solicitation, the organism's cognitive, perceptual and motoric abilities are recruited to pick up ecological information, to discover affordances in the environment that allow for the pursuit of the goal associated with the solicitation and to execute the corresponding actions. As such, the perception of a solicitation is intrinsically motivational.

Solicitations also abound in the environment. Several things can solicit an agent at the same time. And these solicitations can vary in intensity or strength (in how urgently they solicit a response). They shift and change as either the environment or the goals and needs of the organism change. For a thirsty animal, a puddle of water may solicit drinking. As the animal satiates its thirst, however, that solicitation becomes less and less urgent. Eventually, it will not solicit the animal at all and other concerns will take precedence and different affordances of the environment will appear as relevant. The same can happen if the puddle dries up – then it will no longer afford drinking, even if the animal remains thirsty. In this sense, an adaptive agent constantly faces and responds to a *dynamic field of solicitations* (Rietveld *et al.*, 2018, p. 58).

Ecological Psychology offers a promising account of appearances of value. We can understand appearances of value as the perception of solicitations. Gibson himself suggests that when he claims that “the meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords” (Gibson *et al.*, 1982, p. 407). Given that many of an object's affordances are irrelevant and meaningless to an agent, “affords” here is naturally understood as referring not to a mere affordance, but to a relevant solicitation. If the value of something is that which it solicits, then to perceive that solicitation is to perceive its value. That is, to see an object as having a particular meaning or evaluative property is to see it as soliciting a certain response. According to this suggestion, to see something as dangerous, for instance, is to see it as soliciting some kind of evasion. To see something as shameful is to see it as soliciting concealment. To see something as pride-worthy is to see it as soliciting display. And so on.

This view provides an alternative, more promising interpretation of the Perceptual Theory of emotions. We can distinguish between affective responses in general and emotions. Affective responses are appearances of value. If we combine that claim with the idea that appearances of value are perceptions of solicitations, the result is that affective responses are perceptions of solicitations. Whenever we perceive something as part of the field of solicitations, it affects us as meaningful in some way.⁹ On this picture, emotional episodes can be characterized as dynamic shifts in one's field of solicitations. According to the Perceptual Theory, fear, for instance, is an appearance of danger. If we understand appearances of value not as non-conceptual representations of evaluative properties, but as perceptions of solicitations, then we can understand fear as the experience of perceiving an object or situation as soliciting evasion. In particular, the experience of fear involves a shift in one's field of solicitations, in such a way that the evasion affordance becomes prominent and urgent as a solicitation.

In addition to providing an account of what is a non-conceptual appearance of a value, this view allows us to reconcile the Perceptual Theory with the motivational role of emotions. The perception of solicitations is, as argued earlier, intrinsically motivational. In an intense bout of fear, for instance, an evasion affordance is experienced as an urgent solicitation to flight. Correspondingly, the agent's cognitive, perceptual and motoric abilities will be recruited to pick up information about the environment, to discover affordances in the environment that allow for evasion and to execute the corresponding actions. The perception of the solicitation involves a state of action-readiness and, thus, comes with an associated motivation.

An Ecological Perceptual Theory can account for the observations that support the Motivational Theory. First, it can account for the fact that each emotion is characterized in terms of a specific action tendency: an "the especially direct and urgent means of goal satisfaction they favor" (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 105). The emotion "favors" a particular course of action because it involves the perception of the environment as soliciting that response. Since solicitations have a motivational grip on the agent, an emoting agent will be drawn to act on that solicitation.

This view can also explain the fact that emotions exhibit control precedence – that fact that "they prioritize a goal and impel its pursuit in ways that often exceed the agent's

⁹ This entails that our basic cognitive relation to the world is always permeated by affectivity. A number of authors in this tradition subscribe to this view. See, for instance, Collombetti (2014, p. 17-19) and Rietveld et al (2018, p. 53).

considered view of its importance” (D’Arms & Jacobson, 2023, p. 105). According to the Ecological Perceptual Theory, emotions involve shifts in the emoting agent’s field of relevant affordance. Emotional episodes are characterized by changes in the field of affordances such that certain solicitations become particularly prominent. That explains the sense in which the emotion prioritizes a certain goal. Consider a bout of shame, for instance. Shame prioritizes the goal of concealing its object. On the Ecological Perceptual Theory that is understood as the claim that for an agent in the grip of shame, the object of that emotion is perceived as urgently soliciting concealment. Given that solicitations exert motivational influence, the emotion can impel the agent to act in a way that disregards their considered judgment.

The result is that, given an ecological theory of perception, the distinction between perceptual and motivational theories becomes very blurred. Given a close enough relation between perception and action, all the claims that distinguish the Motivational Theory can be made by a supporter of the Perceptual Theory.

Indeed, the Ecological Perceptual Theory can help itself to the same account of emotional appraisal put forward by the Motivational Theory. Both views agree that emotions have no representational content and that the formulation of an emotion’s appraisal cannot be taken as a formulation of its representational content. According to the Motivational Theory, the formulation of the appraisal of an emotion is an interpretive claim that describe the significance that features of the environment that the emotion is tracking have for the concerned, emoting agent. That significance can be read off the motivational profile of the emotion. So, for instance, the motivational profile of shame indicates a concern with how one is viewed by others. Features of the environment that bear on that concern will strike the shameful agent as meaningful in a particular way, precisely on account of how they bear on that concern. The gloss on the emotion’s appraisal describes the significance these features of the environment have for the concerned agent. So, “reflects poorly on me” captures the appraisal of shame.

The Ecological Perceptual Theory can say the same. An emoting agent that perceives a feature of the environment as soliciting a certain response, thereby manifests a particular concern. That feature of environment has a particular meaning for the agent on account of how it bears of that concern. Our gloss on the appraisal of that emotion is an attempt at describing that significance, at describing the way it bears of the concern the emotion manifests. In that sense, when we articulate the appraisal of an emotion, we are offering our take on the meaningful distinction to which someone that perceives an object as soliciting a



particular response is responding to.¹⁰

3.3. *Feelings of Approval*

A neo-sentimentalist account of virtue holds that a trait is a virtue if, and only if, feeling approval is an appropriate response to it. Two conditions must be satisfied if this view is to be made plausible. First, feelings of approval should be characterized without reference to the concept of virtue, so as to avoid circularity. Second, the characterization of feelings of approval must identify the manner in which they appraise their objects, so as to provide informative criteria of fittingness or appropriateness. If all one could say is that feelings of approval are appropriate when their object is a virtue, the neo-sentimentalist analysis of virtue would be uninformative. It would amount to the trivial claim that a trait is a virtue if, and only if, it is a virtue.

In this section I will argue that these two conditions can be satisfied if we apply the Ecological Perceptual Theory to feelings of approval and disapproval.¹¹

According to this framework, affective responses are appearances of value. Feelings of approval amount, then, to appearances of virtue. Appearances of value are understood as perceptions of solicitations or relevant affordances. So, in order to characterize feelings of approval we must specify the relevant affordances. What kind of response virtue and vice characteristically afford?

Only a being for whom the distinction between virtue and vice was practically relevant would perceive affordances associated with them. We can start by asking: for what kind of being is that distinction relevant? The distinction between virtue and vice is one between desirable and undesirable character traits. The point of that distinction is to sort out better from worse agents. As such, it is relevant only to an agent that concerns itself with the quality of other agents. What kind of agent has that concern? Well, that would be central concern for social beings that have to choose who they will associate themselves with. For those beings, it makes sense to sort out good from bad agents because that distinction can guide the selection of potential social partners. In particular, the distinction between virtue and vice will be relevant to a being that has to select among potential partners based on their character traits.

¹⁰ Vogelmann (2024b) offers an enactive account of meaningful distinctions and the way emotions respond to them.

¹¹ What follows is a description merely of what I take to be a plausible application of the theory to these affective responses. I do not expect it to be a decisive argument in favor of that view. For a more sustained argument in favor of this characterization of the feelings of approval and disapproval see Vogelmann (2026).



If that is correct, the point of the distinction between virtue and vice is to regulate one's relation to one's peers. If there are affordances associated with that distinction, they must be affordances that play a role in the regulation of social relationships. We can identify the relevant affordances by considering the possibilities that present themselves to a being that is faced with the task of selecting social partners.

Beings that are mutually dependent, that is, that cannot meet their needs and interests without the help of others (Tomasello, 2016, p. 15-16), will face the task of selecting social partners (Tomasello, 2016, p. 58). These beings will have to form cooperative relationships, otherwise they will perish. But that is a risky business. Associating with free-riders or with agents that take more than their fair share of the products of the cooperation, for instance, may be harmful and is certainly sub-optimal. A cooperative an adaptive agent, therefore, will have a concern with selecting partners that do not display dispositions to act in that manner. Mutually dependent beings that have to worry about breakdowns in collaboration, with cheaters, thieves, free riders, deserters and so on, it makes sense to select partners for association based on the behavioral and affective dispositions they exhibit.

That activity of partner choice will be guided by the affective responses that motivate patterns of behavior capable of discriminating between agents that are suitable and unsuitable as cooperative partners. These responses must regulate the agent's relationship with its peers: they must be such that they facilitate association with cooperative individuals and hinder association with non-cooperative individuals. That will be the case if we assume that the agent's response to its peers is prompted by the perception of a particular family of affordances. On the one hand, this agent must perceive uncooperative agents as affording responses that hinder the formation or maintenance of a cooperative relationship. On the other hand, it must perceive cooperative agents as affording responses that tend to promote or facilitate the formation or maintenance of a cooperative relationship. The latter include such responses reciprocation for received benefits, praise, reward and various form of bonding behavior. The former includes such responses as aggression, cooperation withdrawal and exclusion. I will refer to the kind of response that tends to foster the relationship as *affiliative responses* and to the kind of response that hinders the relationship as *anti-affiliative responses*.

In general, for the agent we are considering, forms of behavior that cohere with a cooperative form of interaction will afford affiliative responses, while forms of behavior that are antagonistic to the purposes of cooperation will afford anti-affiliative reactions. Free-

riders and cheater, for instance, will be perceived as affording cooperation withdrawal, exclusion and so on. Hard-working, fair agents, will be perceived as further cooperation, reciprocation, exchange of good or information and so on. A being whose activity of social regulation is guided by these affordances, will be more likely to form relationships with agents that exhibit cooperation-friendly dispositions and less likely to form relationships with agents with anti-social tendencies.

By responding to these affordances, therefore, this agent will discriminate between agent's he welcomes and agent's he does not welcome as social partners. The grounds for that discrimination are the behavioral tendencies agents exhibit. Character traits are constituted, at least in part, by behavioral dispositions. So, by responding to affiliative and anti-affiliative affordances, that being will also discriminate between character traits he welcomes in its social partners and character traits he does not welcome or, which is the same, between character traits that are desirable or undesirable in his social partners. The distinction between virtue and vice, we said earlier, just is the distinction between desirable and undesirable character traits. So, the being we described would draw the distinction between virtue and vice. That provides an answer to the question with which we started: what kind of response virtue and vice afford? The answer is: for a social being, virtues afford affiliative responses and vices afford anti-affiliative responses.

In light of the Ecological Perceptual Theory, the affective responses of approval and disapproval (the appearances of virtue and vice) can be characterized as the perception of agents or their character traits as affording affiliative and anti-affiliative responses, respectively. That provides us with the first desideratum for a neo-sentimentalist account of virtue: a characterization of feelings of approval and disapproval that makes no reference to the categories of virtue and vice.

The second desideratum is to offer a gloss on the appraisal of these affective responses that can provide informative criteria of fittingness or appropriateness. That desideratum can be satisfied by appeal to account of appraisal that is common to the Motivational and the Ecological Perceptual Theory. According to this account, the gloss on the appraisal of an affective state is a description of the significance, for the affective agent, of the features of the environment that affective state tracks. And features of the environment acquire significance on account of how they bear on a concern. Every affective response reflects a concern. The perception of affiliative and anti-affiliative affordances, in particular, reflects a concern with the quality of the agents one associates with. Character traits bear on that concern to the extent they make one suitable or unsuitable as a social partner. Those



character traits that are undesirable bear on that concern because they render one unsuitable for association as a social partner. Character traits that are desirable bear on that concern to the extent they render one a suitable candidate for association. So, we can say that approval (the perception of affiliative affordances) and disapproval (the perception of anti-affiliative affordances) appraise their objects as traits that render one suitable or unsuitable for association as a social partner.

The result is an account of the feelings of approval and disapproval that is suitable for a neo-sentimentalist theory of virtue. According to this theory, a trait is a virtue/vice if, and only if, feeling approval/disapproval is a fitting response to it. Feelings of approval/disapproval are perceptions of affiliative/anti-affiliative affordances. And they are fitting when they correctly appraise their objects. Feelings of approval/disapproval appraise their objects as traits that render one suitable/unsuitable for association as a social partner. The upshot is that to judge a trait is a virtue/vice is to judge that it is indeed a trait that renders one suitable/unsuitable as a social partner.

4. Testing Values for Coherence

Recall the coherence test for valuing patterns set out in section 2. It was based in three central claims. First, that our normative judgments about reasons for action reflect our values. Second, that our normative judgments commit us to a partial conception of virtue (that was the *Connection* thesis). And third, the *Supposition* that an agent's assessment of other agents also reflect her values. The result was that a valuation pattern that simultaneously produces a conception of virtue and a normative judgment that, on its turn, entails an incompatible conception of virtue would, thereby, reveal itself to be internally incoherent.

The neo-sentimentalist account of virtue described in the previous section allows for a defense of the crucial *Supposition*. According to this approach, to judge an agent to be virtuous is to judge that approval is an appropriate affective response to that agent. Approval is understood as the perception of affiliative affordances and it is appropriate when the target of the response is suitable for association as a social partner. So, the judgment that an agent is virtuous commits one to the claim that she is suitable for association. *Supposition*, then, can be defended in the following terms: an agent that acts in way that is antagonistic to my values cannot be a suitable candidate for association for me. It would make no sense to perceive an agent that harms me or destroys what matters to me as affording affiliative responses. That response would not be only unadvisable, but meaningless. So, one cannot



coherently judge an agent that is antagonistic to one's values virtuous.

With that we can set up the coherence test at the base of modest constructivism. Let us return to the example of the *predatory agent*. That is an agent that values herself and her interests but finds no value whatsoever in others and their interests. That agent will find perfect and decisive reasons to act in a predatory way, harming others for her own benefit. Assuming she accepts that the ideal of virtue that applies to her is the same as that which applies to her peers¹², this normative judgment implies that any perfectly virtuous agent is predatory. That agent is committed, then, to the judgment that the predatory behavior of others is compatible with virtue – even when she is the target of that kind of behavior. She cannot, however, uphold that judgment. When she is the victim of predatory behavior, judging the perpetrator virtuous would commit her to the claim that the perpetrator is, to the extent he behaves in a predatory manner, suitable as a social partner. That amounts to the claim that perceiving the perpetrator as affording affiliative behavior would be appropriate. And that is not case. That response would make no sense, neither from the perspective of the values of the predatory agent (that cares only about herself) nor in light of the practice of partner choice (which grounds the meaningful distinction between suitable and unsuitable candidates for association). The result is that, given the neo-sentimentalist analyses of virtue judgments, the predatory agent cannot coherently judge other predatory agents as virtuous. The normative judgments she is committed to, however, entail that perfectly virtuous agents are predatory. There is an incoherence in her practical perspective.

As argued in section 2, that incoherence can only be corrected by changing the agent valuation pattern. In particular, as long as that agent continues to value herself and her interests, the only way to restore coherence is by abandoning the judgment that she has

¹² This assumption is yet to be justified. An agent could avoid the incoherence by holding that the ideal of virtue that applies to her is different than the ideal of virtue that applies to others. For instance, an agent could hold that the ideal of virtue that applies to her is that of a predatory agent, while the ideal of virtue that applies to others precludes that kind of behavior. I do not believe that that is a genuine possibility because I do not believe it possible to dissociate the meaning of an evaluative category from the practices that engender it. The distinction between virtue and vice derives, if the discussion of the previous section is correct, from the activity of co-regulation of social relations. So, the meaning of the distinction is tied to that practice. Seeing oneself as virtuous is a matter of seeing oneself as someone that would be flagged as virtuous in that practice. Now, what flags a certain pattern of behavior as virtuous in that practice is the fact that it affords affiliative behavior. So, in order for the predatory agent to conceive of herself as virtuous, she would have to conceive of her behavior as one that affords affiliative responses for her peers that are engaged in the activity of partner choice. And that is plainly false. Another way of making the same point is that self-attribution of virtue always involves seeing oneself as an individual who satisfies socially shared criteria of virtue. That still leaves open the possibility that a group could uphold a discriminatory view according to which the ideal of virtue is different for members of the group and for outsiders. If that is a coherent position, then we must add another layer of moderation and restrict the results of modest constructivism to intra-group morality. Pursuing this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.



reason to behave in a predatory manner. Doing so would amount to acknowledging that others have at the very least a negative value that acts as a limit to her actions.

The same line of reasoning applies to any strongly asymmetric valuing pattern. For instance, an agent that values her well-being but not the well-being of others, or that values her freedom but not the freedom of others, will incur in the same kind of incoherence. And that incoherence can be corrected only by recognizing a corresponding negative value in the well-being, freedom, and interests of others. The upshot is that at least one, very general and minimal, but nevertheless central, moral restriction can be derived from the practical perspective of any rational and affective agent that assesses other agents in terms of virtue and vice. This is the demand for a *weak form of reciprocity*, according to which whenever an agent values something – her own life, happiness, goals, or freedom – she must also acknowledge a corresponding negative value in others.

Conclusion

I offered a defense of modest constructivism. This version of constructivism differs from extant versions of Kantian and Humean constructivism in that it starts from a richer characterization of the relevant c-agents. The particular version of sentimentalist constructivism that is the object of this paper enriches that characterization in two ways: (i) the c-agents are not only endowed with the capacity for practical reasoning, but are also agents that evaluate their peers in terms of virtue and vice and (ii) a form of neo-sentimentalism about virtue is true for these agents.

I argued that it is possible to derive certain moral reasons from the perspective of any such c-agent, independently of what are their substantive normative commitments. In particular, it is possible to show that, for these agents, valuing patterns that violate a demand for weak reciprocity violate requirements of synchronic consistency: they lead to an inconsistent conception of virtue.

This grants a kind of limited constructivist objectivity to the moral reasons that follow from the demand for weak reciprocity. These moral reasons are objective not in the sense of corresponding mind-independent facts, but in the sense that they are necessarily shared by sentimentalist c-agents, regardless of what their contingent attitudes happen to be.

This result is doubly modest. First, it does not imply that any being endowed with practical reason is committed to moral values. Its scope of application is restricted to the relevant sentimentalist c-agents. Second, even if we consider only sentimentalist c-agents, it does not show that reasons corresponding to every moral demand can be derived from



the practical perspective of these agents. There is no guarantee that every moral value can be vindicated by the coherence test described here. Some can, such as the negative values that derive from the demand for weak reciprocity. But there may well be other moral values that can be rejected without incoherence.

Nevertheless, if this defense of modest constructivism is successful, that is a significant result. It shows that for beings like us, rational and affective beings that assess other agents in terms of qualities and defects of character, certain typically immoral patterns of valuation are internally inconsistent.

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