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Emotional Appraisal as the Perception of Affordances¹

Avaliação Emocional como Percepção de Affordances

La Valoración Emocional como Percepción de Affordances

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Abstract: Appraisal is a central concept in cognitive approaches in affective science. According to Appraisal Theory, emotions are elicited and differentiated on the basis of the appraisal of the personal significance of a situation, object, or event one is faced with. This paper addresses the question of what exactly are emotional appraisals. I discuss and reject the claim that appraisals are evaluative judgments and the claim that appraisals are embodied appraisals. Both views ascribe representational content to emotions. I argue instead that we should take appraisals to be perceptions of relevant affordances. This view can account for the observations that favor cognitive conceptions of emotions (such as the fact that emotions are intentional, value-laden states that can be rationally assessed) while avoiding the problems faced by views that ascribe representational content to emotions.

Keywords: Emotional Appraisal, Emotions, Affordances, Perception.

Resumo: Avaliação é um conceito central para abordagens cognitivas na ciência afetiva. De acordo com a Teoria da Avaliação, emoções são produzidas e diferenciadas com base na avaliação da relevância pessoal da situação, objeto ou evento com o qual alguém se depara. Este artigo aborda a questão de o que exatamente são avaliações emocionais. Eu discuto e rejeito a alegação de que avaliações são juízos de valor e a alegação de que avaliações são avaliações corporificadas. Essas duas teses atribuem conteúdo representacional às emoções. Em contraste, argumento que devemos tomar avaliações emocionais como percepções de *affordances* relevantes. Essa tese pode explicar as observações que favorecem as concepções cognitivas das emoções (como o fato de que as emoções são estados intencionais permeados de valores que podem ser avaliados racionalmente), ao mesmo tempo que evita os problemas enfrentados pelas teorias que atribuem conteúdo representacional às emoções.

Palavras-chave: avaliação emocional; emoções; *affordances*; percepção.

Resumen: La valoración es un concepto central en los enfoques cognitivos de la ciencia afectiva. Según la Teoría de la Valoración, las emociones se generan y diferencian a partir de la valoración del significado personal de una situación, objeto o evento al que nos enfrentamos. Este artículo aborda la cuestión de qué son exactamente las valoraciones emocionales. Analizo y rechazo la afirmación de que las valoraciones son juicios evaluativos y la de que son valoraciones encarnadas. Ambas perspectivas atribuyen contenido representacional a las emociones. En cambio, sostengo que deberíamos entender las valoraciones como percepciones de *affordances* relevantes. Esta perspectiva puede explicar las observaciones que favorecen las concepciones cognitivas de las emociones (como el hecho de que las emociones son estados intencionales, cargados de valor, que pueden evaluarse racionalmente), a la vez que evita los problemas que enfrentan las perspectivas que atribuyen contenido representacional a las emociones.

Palabras clave: valoración emocional; emociones; *affordances*; percepción.



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1 Introduction

Appraisal is a central concept in cognitive approaches in affective science. What characterizes the cognitive approach is the claim that emotions involve some cognitive element, such that a purely non-cognitive state (a pure feeling or sensation, or a mere bodily change) does not qualify, by itself, as an emotion. Appraisal theory identifies the relevant class of cognitive states as appraisals (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1993).

The central claim of appraisal theory is "that emotions are elicited and differentiated on the basis of a person's subjective evaluation or appraisal of the personal significance of a situation, object, or event on a number of dimensions or criteria" (Scherer, 1999, p. 637). One of the main goals of that theory, then, is to differentiate between emotions in terms of the appraisals associated with them. Appraisals can be characterized in terms of a set of dimensions or criteria against which potentially emotion-eliciting situations are assessed (Griffiths, 2004, p. 89). These criteria might include whether the individual's goals are being achieved or frustrated, whether someone else is responsible for my current situation or not, whether and how I can cope with the situation, and so on. To answer one of these questions is to evaluate one aspect of the situation. According to appraisal theory, the overall appraisal corresponding to a particular emotion can be characterized in terms of a distinctive set of answers to these questions. Richard Lazarus' (1991) model of emotional appraisal has six dimensions of evaluation. Different sets of evaluations along these dimensions delineate regions in the resulting space that correspond to particular emotions. Lazarus summarizes each of these regions (each set of evaluations) as the core relational theme of the corresponding emotion. The idea is that the appraisals associated with each emotion are organized around a "topic" – the core relational theme of that emotion. So, the core theme of sadness is "having experienced an irrevocable loss," the theme of anger is "a demeaning offense against me and mine", the theme of fear is "An

immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger", and the theme of disgust is "taking in or being too close to an indigestible object or idea" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 64).

This paper addresses the question of what exactly are appraisals. A popular answer to this question is simply to hold that appraisals are evaluative judgments about the emotion-eliciting object. This proposal is motivated by the fact that emotions are intentional and value-laden states that can be rationally assessed. Taking emotions to involve evaluative judgments easily accounts for these features (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 25-28). This view, however, faces several problems. In section 2 I discuss some of these problems and how they led to the development of multi-level appraisal theories. These theories distinguish between high-level appraisals (that are explicit, verbally reportable, cognitive evaluations) and low-level appraisals that are independent of and can contradict high-level appraisals. The question then is how to characterize low-level appraisals. In section 3 and 4, I discuss and raise problems for two proposals: the view that low-level appraisals are evaluative judgments defended by Nussbaum (2001) and the view that they are embodied appraisals defended by Prinz (2007). Both of those views take appraisals to be states with representational content. In section 5, I present an alternative according to which appraisals can be understood as the perception of affordances. Since the perception of affordances is thought not to involve internal representations, this proposal allows us to account for the fact that emotions are intentional and value-laden states that can be rationally assessed without incurring in the problems that flow from taking emotions to have representational content. This proposal, however, faces a problem: if low-level appraisals are perceptions of affordances, appraisal theory cannot be seen as a theory that describes the content of judgments associated with emotions nor as a theory that describes the representational content of embodied emotions. In particular, Lazarus' (1991) core relational themes cannot be seen as descriptions of what an agent thinks

when she emotes nor as a description of what the agent's emotions represent. What, then, is the relation between Lazarus' core relational themes and the low-level appraisal associated with an emotion? In section 6, I build upon Griffiths' suggestions (2004) that core relational themes describe the ecological significance of certain aspects of the environment to the emoting organism. By combining the claim that the perception of a relevant affordance is an appearance of value or meaning with the claim that core relational themes describe the ecological significance of the emotion-eliciting object we can account for the relation between low level-appraisal and core relational themes. The low-level appraisal is a perception of an affordance that presents (in a non-representational, non-conceptual manner) its object as having a particular meaning or significance to the organism and the corresponding core relational theme conceptually describes that meaning or significance.

2 Multi-level Appraisal

A simple and popular interpretation of appraisal theory takes appraisals to be explicit, verbally reportable, cognitive evaluations, i.e., evaluative judgments. Prinz, for instance, characterizes appraisal theory as the view that "emotions are felt responses to appraisal judgments, and appraisal judgments are explicit, though perhaps unconscious, assessments of one's relation to the world" (Prinz, 2007, p. 51). And Nussbaum, while holding that Lazarus' appraisal theory is "in all essentials the view of emotions I have defended" (2001, p. 109), argues for the view that emotions are appraisals or value judgments (2001, p. 4) and that they include in their content judgments that can be true or false (2001, p. 1).

This view faces a number of serious objections. First, one can experience an emotion without making the corresponding evaluative judgment. For instance, a phobic agent can be afraid, even terrified, of something she does not judge to be dangerous. We often feel disgusted by things we do not judge to be indigestible or unhealthy. And one can feel guilty about something one did

without actually believing it to be wrong. This suggests that making an evaluative judgment corresponding to a core relational theme is not a necessary condition for emoting. Second, an agent can make an evaluative judgment corresponding to a core relational theme without experiencing the corresponding emotion. That seems to be the case with people with "flattened affect", who apparently can make cognitive evaluative judgments normally but fail to experience the corresponding emotion. Prinz conceives of a "well-trained stoic" that can make evaluative judgments without experiencing any emotional response (Prinz, 2007, p. 56). These cases suggest that making an evaluative judgment corresponding to a core relational theme is not sufficient for emoting. Furthermore, other animals and small children are also capable of emoting and share many of human adult emotions. They lack, however, the conceptual skills necessary for making verbally reportable evaluations.

There is also ample empirical evidence to support the claim that emotions are not always elicited nor accompanied by explicit, verbally reportable, cognitive evaluations. Öhman and Soares (1994), for instance, exposed subjects to subliminal images of snakes, spiders, flowers and mushrooms. The subjects were unable to identify the stimuli they had been exposed to, but subjects with snake phobia showed elevated skin conductance in response to snake images while subjects with spider phobia showed the same response to spider images (Öhman; Soares, 1994). And Gelder *et al.* (1999) showed that individuals with blindsight (that is, individuals with otherwise normal vision, but who have lesions to the visual cortex that prevent them from visually experiencing part of their visual fields) can react emotionally to faces presented in their blind field even though they had no visual experience of the faces. In these cases, the subjects respond emotionally to information that is unavailable to other cognitive processes (such as conscious report and recall).

Anatomical evidence points in the same direction. LeDoux (1996) neurological findings suggest

that a visual stimulus can elicit an emotional response before the emotion-eliciting object is fully recognized. LeDoux has shown that there is a neural pathway from the eyes to the amygdala going through the thalamus. The amygdala has a primary role in the production of emotional responses such as fear or anxiety. The thalamus is a sensory hub to which sense organs send signals on their way to the neocortex. The information processing that takes place at the thalamus amounts to the very early stage of perceptual processing. In particular, the information that follows directly from the thalamus to the amygdala is minimally processed and falls short of full-blown perception. But it is enough for identifying and responding emotionally to certain objects. LeDoux gives the example of a coiled snake. That is such a distinctive visual cue that the minimally processed visual data sent from the thalamus to the amygdala when one is faced with a coiled snake is enough to trigger a fear reaction, even before one has time to recognize the object. This shows that we can respond emotionally to perceptual information before the stimulus has been fully processed to allow for recognition and using very simple thalamic sensory cues.

These findings strongly suggest that emotions can arise without evaluative judgments. However, even emotions that are not accompanied by evaluative judgments seem to be rationally assessable. The fear an agent with spider phobia feels when confronted with a harmless spider (or a toy spider) can be said to be unjustified, unwarranted or inappropriate, while the fear in face of a dangerous spider is justified, warranted or appropriate. Indeed, the core relational themes of appraisal theory seem to describe the conditions under which emotional responses of a particular kind are appropriate. Holding that even emotions that are not accompanied by an explicit evaluative judgment somehow incorporate appraisals of the emotion-eliciting situation provides a straightforward explanation why these emotions are rationally assessable: the emotion is inappropriate or unwarranted when the appraisal it involves is incorrect.

This has led to the development of "multi-level appraisal theories". These theories hold that emotions are elicited by the appraisal of information about certain aspects of the environment, but that the information processing and the appraisal of that information can occur at different cognitive levels (Teasdale, 1999). We can distinguish between "high-level" and "low-level" appraisal. High-level appraisals are explicit, verbally reportable, cognitive evaluations that are integrated with the organism's other beliefs – that is, conscious evaluative judgments. Low-level appraisals are a form of information processing that leads to emotional responses, but such that the emotion-eliciting stimuli can be assessed before its perceptual processing is completed, using minimal sensory cues and in such a way that the information evaluated and the appraisal itself can remain unavailable to other cognitive processes (such as conscious report and recall). The low-level appraisal that elicits an emotion can be independent from or contradict the high-level, verbally reportable, appraisal of the same stimulus. The former is the case with the phobic subjects in the study by Öhman and Soares (1994) that were not aware of the stimuli to which they were responding emotionally and the latter is the case with agents that experience fear in response to an object they judge to be harmless.

The claim that there are two kinds of information processing that can lead to an emotional response, one that relies on paradigmatic cognitive processes and other that does not is actually supported by LeDoux (1996) findings. The pathway connecting the thalamus to the amygdala provides a "quick and dirty" route to rapid emotional response. The thalamic perceptual information also follows a slower "high road" that eventually reaches the brain regions associated with full-blown perceptual recognition of the object and with memory. The amygdala receives inputs from these regions, which allows emotional response to be triggered by complex and contextual features of the stimulus. There are, then, two routes from stimuli to emotional response mediated by the amygdala: the low, quick and dirty one, that relies

on partially processed information, unavailable to other paradigmatic cognitive processes, and the slower, high one that relies on paradigmatic cognitive processes.

Multi-level appraisal theories hold that low-level appraisals and high-level appraisals can contradict each other or coincide. That is what allows it to explain why emotions associated with low-level appraisals can be rationally assessed. To judge that an emotional response is inappropriate or unwarranted is to make a high-level appraisal, an evaluative judgment, that contradicts the appraisal associated with that emotion. One judges an episode of anger to be inappropriate when one holds that no demeaning offense took place; one judges an episode of fear to be unwarranted when one holds that one is not faced with an actual physical danger; and so on. To judge an emotion to be appropriate is simply to make a high-level appraisal that matches the low-level appraisal that elicits that emotion. If we assume that high-level appraisals assess the emotion-eliciting stimuli in terms of Lazarus' (1991) core relational themes it follows that low-level appraisals – even though they are the result of sub-personal processes, that can operate upon partially processed perceptual stimuli, and are not verbally reportable – are also complex assessments of the relevant stimuli along the dimensions identified by Lazarus' model. This, however, raises the question of what exactly are low-level appraisals and how can they coincide with or contradict conscious, verbally reportable, evaluative judgments.

3 Low-Level Appraisals as Evaluative Judgments

One option is to hold that low-level appraisals are also evaluative judgments. That is the position defended by Nussbaum. She holds that in cases in which emotion and judgment seem to be at odds with each other, the agent actually holds two incompatible judgments. She considers the case of a person who believes dogs to be harmless but still fears dogs and asks if that means that one can have an emotion without upholding the

judgment that corresponds to its core relational theme. She answers that the “examples do not support such a conclusion, for the simple reason that we may often hold contradictory beliefs” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 45). So, Nussbaum takes the low-level appraisal associated with the episode of fear in this example to be an evaluative judgment that contradicts the judgment the agent explicitly makes.

Her treatment of the emotions of small children and animals is similar. She holds that the emotions of animals also correspond to evaluative judgments, but that they make these judgments without self-awareness and in such a way that the content of these judgments cannot be precisely captured in our language. So, she takes animal emotions (and the same treatment applies to the emotions of small children) to incorporate low-level appraisals conceived of as evaluative judgments. All we need to account for those low-level appraisals, she claims, “is a multifaceted notion of cognitive interpretation or seeing-as, accompanied by a flexible notion of intentionality that allows us to ascribe to a creature more or less precise, vaguer or more demarcated, ways of intending an object and marking it as salient” (Nussbaum, 2001, 129).

I agree with Nussbaum that a notion of seeing-as that allows us to ascribe to an animal a way of picking out something as salient or relevant can provide us with an adequate account of emotional responses. I take issue with the claim that this notion can be flesh out as a form of evaluative judgment. There are several reasons to think that low-level appraisal and evaluative judgments are psychological states of different kinds.

First, the proposal that low-level appraisals are evaluative judgments is phenomenologically implausible. When we have an emotion that is at odds with our explicit evaluations, it does not seem to us as if we are entertaining two incompatible judgments. If I fear a harmless dog, it seems to me that I judge it to be harmless (and do not judge it to be dangerous), but nevertheless experience fear. The view also seems to poorly describe cases in which explicit evaluative judg-

ment and low-level appraisal march in step. I see a coiled snake, I have an immediate emotional response of fear tied to a low-level appraisal, and I also explicitly judge the snake to be dangerous. Do I have one or two judgments here? Nussbaum (2001) seems committed to holding that there are two separate judgments at play, just as when low-level and high-level appraisals clash. But how can we understand that? Am I thinking the same thought twice? But what could that mean? Or perhaps one judgment is conscious and the other one is unconscious. But what is it for the same evaluation to be conscious and unconscious? And what am I unconscious of if I am aware that I take the snake to be dangerous?

Second, in contrast with evaluative judgments, low-level appraisals are not integrated with the organism's other beliefs. The information processing that leads to low-appraisals does not have access to information that is available to the whole organism. That is why knowing the snake to be harmless may not eliminate the fear response and why knowing that the cockroach in my drink has been completely sterilized does not eliminate the disgust response (Griffiths, 2004, p. 95). And, as the empirical evidence mentioned above indicates, that information processing may also not be available for conscious inspection by other cognitive processes. That is why making a low-level appraisal does not lead one to explicitly make the corresponding evaluative judgment.

Third, low-level appraisals are linked to bodily changes in a way that is not mirrored by evaluative judgments. It has long been recognized that emotions have a connection to bodily change that enable certain actions. The bodily changes we undergo when we experience an emotion underlie what Frijda (1986) calls "action tendencies". The bodily changes associated with fear, for instance, prepares us for the usual responses to danger: the fight-flight-or-freeze response. The racing heart facilitates flight, the strained breathing makes us harder to detect and open eyes and mouth allows us to take in more visual and olfactory information (Prinz, 2007, p. 54). One can make the judgment that something presents a

danger without experiencing those bodily changes, but the low-level appraisal associated with fear cannot be dissociated from them.

Fourth, as LeDoux (1996) findings show, low-level appraisals can be made in response to very simple, minimally processed sensory cues that fall short of full-blown object recognition. That makes it hard to see how their content could be the same as the content of explicit evaluative judgments, made after the object is recognized. The same problem pertains to the emotions of small children and non-human animals. If they lack our evaluative concepts, how can their low-level appraisals share the same content as our evaluative judgments? Nussbaum (2001, p. 127) responds to this problem by holding that the appraisals involved in the emotions of animals and small children "are linguistically formulable in a way" but only "loosely accurate" because formulating them linguistically involves a certain "degree of distortion". She goes as far as to claim that the same is true of some of our own self-ascriptions of emotions – even in these cases "the best translation an observer can make will involve some degree of distortion" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 127). She explicitly admits that we "cannot think of all emotions as having a linguistically formulable content" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 89). Ascriptions of low-level appraisal seem to fit the bill. But if the content of these appraisals cannot be captured in evaluative language without distortion, why insist that they are judgments? Indeed, at this point of her argumentation, Nussbaum shifts from talking about judgments to talking about the cognitive activity of seeing-as. Holding that emotions involve seeing the emotion-eliciting object as salient, meaningful or valuable is a plausible view, which I will defend in what follows, but it is not the same as appraisals are evaluative judgments. Nussbaum herself, at some points, seems happy to formulate her view not as the claim that emotions are identical to judgments, but as the claim that emotions are identical to "value-laden cognitive states" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 74) that need not be understood as judgments.

Nussbaum (2001) could still insist that treating

low-level appraisals as judgments allow us to account for the fact that emotions are cognitive, intentional and value-laden states. But I will argue, we can account for these admittedly important points, while avoiding the complications involved in postulating non-linguistically-formulable judgments that still manage to contradict linguistically formulated judgments, by treating low-level appraisals as appearances of value.

4 Low-Level Appraisals as Embodied Appraisals

Another option, once favored by Prinz (2007), is to hold that low-level appraisals are constituted by a set of patterned somatic changes in the body that form part of an embodied representational system that tracks organism-environment relations that are relevant to the organism's goals.

Prinz builds upon the theory advanced by William James (1884) and Carl Lange (1885) according to which emotions are feelings of patterned changes in the body (Prinz, 2007, p. 53). Fear, for instance, is the feeling of the somatic changes our body undergoes in order to facilitate the flight-or-flight response. By combining the James-Lange theory with the kind of naturalistic approach to representation defended by Dretske (1988), Prinz manages to hold that the set of bodily changes associated with an emotion itself represents concerns of the organism and, to that extent, amounts to an appraisal of the emotion-eliciting situation.

According to Dretske, a representation M represents that which it has the function of reliably detecting. As Prinz (2007, p. 112) puts it "M represents that which it was set up to be set off by". Importantly, Dretske's theory does not depend on any assumptions about the form of representations. Representations may be conceptual, but they need not be. So, a smoke alarm's beep represents smoke because it is reliably caused by smoke. The same goes for mental representations. The concept of water represents water because it is reliably deployed when water is encountered. According to Prinz, if an emotion (conceived as the felt perception of a particular set of bodily changes) is reliably caused by a stimulus S, then

that emotion represents S. If the racing heart and blood flow to the extremities that characterizes fear tends to arise when and only when the organism is faced with danger, then fear (the perception of those bodily changes) represents danger. If sadness tends to occur when one experiences a significant loss, then sadness represents loss. And so on. Prinz argues that patterned bodily changes associated with different emotions have evolved as responses to organism-environment relations that bears on the well-being of the organism. Fear prepares us for flight or fight, sadness prepares us for withdrawal and diminished activity, disgust prepares to reject indigestible substances, and so on. To the extent these relations bear on the goals of the organism, they can be characterized as concerns of the organism. According to Prinz, then, emotions represent the concerns to which they respond. "Emotions are reliably caused by bodily changes but they represent things such as loss and danger, the organism/environment relations that induce these changes in us" (Prinz, 2007, p. 63).

Prinz's view is called *embodied appraisal theory*. According to it, bodily states, or perceptions of bodily states, even though they do not involve concepts of any kind and are not judgments, represent concerns and, as such, have the kind of content associated with appraisal judgments. These bodily states, then, can be rationally assessed as justified or unjustified, appropriate or inappropriate. The fear I experience when faced with a harmless snake, which is the felt perception of my racing heart among other things, can be said to be incorrect or inappropriate because it represents the snake as a danger.

The main problem for this proposal, acknowledged by Prinz (see Shargel; Prinz, 2017, p. 113), is that it renders the emotion an arbitrary symbol of the concern it represents and, as such, makes the bodily changes that constitute the emotion and the associated action tendency irrelevant to the rational assessment. In Dretske's (1988) theory, the content of a representation M is determined by the covariation between M and that which it represents. What M turns out to be (a mental state,

a sound, set of bodily changes) is irrelevant to the determination of its content. It is no more than an arbitrary symbol of that which it represents. So, the fact that emotions are realized by bodily changes turns out to be irrelevant to determine their content. The same content (concerns) could be represented without bodily changes. That is an unfortunate conclusion because at least part of what makes an emotion associated with a low-level appraisal appropriate or inappropriate seems to be the actions the corresponding bodily changes set up. We would like to say, for instance, that the fear I experience when faced with a harmless snake is inappropriate because it prepares me for a reaction which is not actually called for by the situation. In the same manner, the fear I feel in face of a dangerous snake is appropriate because it prepares me for an action that is called for by the situation. According to Prinz's embodied appraisal theory, however, the fact that the emotion sets up an inappropriate response is not part of what explains the inappropriateness of the emotion. The emotion is inappropriate when it represents (as an arbitrary symbol) an organism-environment relation that does not in fact obtain. The fact that it sets up an inappropriate response is a consequence of that, given our particular evolutionary history, but it is not what makes the emotion inappropriate.

An embodied theory of low-level appraisal that tied the appropriateness of an emotional response more tightly with the appropriateness of the action tendency manifested in the emotional episode would have an important advantage over embodied appraisal theory.

5 Low-Level Appraisal as the Perception of Relevant Affordances

I have articulated problems both for the view that low-level appraisals are evaluative judgments and the view they are a collection of bodily changes that represents, non-conceptually, the content of those judgments. Surely, that is not

enough to refute those views, but it does motivate the search for an alternative that preserves the cognitivist insights at their base while avoiding the problems they face. In what follows, I will offer such an alternative. In particular, I propose that low-level appraisals are appearances of value. When an agent experiences an emotion, the emotion-eliciting object is *presented* to the agent as having a particular significance. When one experiences fear, for instance, the object is presented as dangerous – in other words, the object *seems* dangerous to the agent. There is no separation between appraisal and emotion – they are a single state. We can ascribe an appraisal to the emoting agent exactly because the core relational themes describe the significance objects or situations seem to have to the agent while it experiences the emotion.

Treating low-level appraisals as appearances of value allows us to account for the features of emotions that motivated Nussbaum (2001) cognitive account without committing to the problematic view that appraisals are evaluative judgments. Nussbaum correctly observed that emotions are intentional states that involve a particular value-laden way of seeing their objects. Evaluative judgments are intentional and present their objects as having a certain range of values. That is why Nussbaum takes evaluative judgments to be the central component of emotions. Appearances of value, however, are also intentional and value-laden states – they present a certain object as having a certain value. Furthermore, an object seeming dangerous to an agent is compatible with that agent judging the object not be dangerous. We are all familiar with the possibility of illusory appearances enduring even after we judge them to be misleading. So, taking emotions to be appearances of value can account for central features of emotions Nussbaum identifies while allowing for the possibility of a clash between emotion and judgment³.

However, if we take appearances of value to

³ Nussbaum (2001, p. 37) is committed to the existence of appearances of value. She holds that a judgment is an assent to an appearance. So, an evaluative judgment is an assent to an appearance of value. She does not seem to consider the possibility that emotions are appearances of value rather than evaluative judgments.

be a kind of representational state, we run the risk of falling back on the same problems faced by Nussbaum's (2001) and Prinz's (2007) views. In order to offer a genuine alternative to those views, what we need is a non-representational account of appearances of value. That can be achieved by conceiving of low-level appraisals as perceptions of affordances.

The notion of affordances derives from Gibson's ecological theory of perception. Gibson's account of perception is presented by contrast with the *snapshot conception of seeing* (Gibson, 2015, p. xiii; see also Nöe, 2012, p. 91). According to this view, visual perception is a passive process of receiving information that is subsequently enriched and processed by the cognitive system to create a representation of the environment. The starting point of perception are stimuli that impinge on our sensory organs and are processed by the brain in order to produce an experience. The stimuli, however, are poor. In the case of vision, the stimuli that reach the retina at a given instant are scarce and discontinuous. For instance, each eye has a blind spot, outside the foveal region the retina has a very low discriminatory potential and our eyes are constantly moving (see Nöe, 2012, p. 92). Despite all that, we do not perceive a patchy, discontinuous, low-resolution world, but a stable, continuous and detailed world. How do we go from the poor stimuli to the rich perception? The traditional answer is that the brain integrates and enriches the fragmentary stimuli into a representation, an internal model of the environment (Neisser, 2014, p. 130; Nöe, 2012, p. 92). This model, then, provides the basis for decision-making.

Gibson rejects the snapshot conception of perception. This view holds that the stimuli are poor because it conceives of perception as the passive reception of instantaneous stimuli. Refusing that supposition allows us to hold that the environment is rich in information. In the environment there are energetic patterns spread out across space and time that are nomologically correlated to objects or events. These patterns provide *ecological information* about the environment. Given that

these patterns are spread out across space and time, they may not be instantaneously accessible. In order to detect the pattern, an organism has to actively explore the environment (by moving around). For instance, the pattern correlated with a ripe tomato is not a pattern detected instantaneously (a certain light array that reaches the retina at a particular moment), but a pattern that unfolds as I move around the tomato, looking at it from different angles. The basis for perception is not the instantaneous stimulus but the flux of stimulation (Carvalho, 2021, p. 5288). According to Gibson, to perceive is to capture ecological information available in the environment. Given that the process of detecting an energetic pattern is a process that takes time as the organism explores the environment, the organism's exploratory activity is constitutive of perception.

There are three claims that are characteristic of Gibson's ecological account of perception (Chemero, 2009, p. 23). First, perception is direct and need not involve internal representations. Because the ecological information available in the environment is rich, perception does not require the creation of an internal model that supplements the available sensory information. By exploring the environment, the organism can capture rich information and use it, directly, to guide its behavior. Second, the detection of ecological information is not made for its own sake, but always serves the practical purpose of guiding the organism's behavior in light of its goals. The function of perception is to guide action. As Scarantino puts it, for Gibson, "to perceive is to pick up information for purposes of behavioral discrimination (rather than for purposes of belief fixation)" (Scarantino, 2003, p. 953). This is connected to the third point: that perception is always the perception of *affordances*. An affordance is a possibility for action the environment provides for the organism. As Gibson puts it, to perceive something is to perceive how to approach it and what to do with it (Gibson, 2015, p. 213). The claim that we perceive affordances does not amount, however, to the claim that to perceive something is to represent the possibilities for action it

provides us. Perception for Gibson is direct and not-representational. Rather, the point is that perception consists in the activity of picking up ecological information and using it to discriminate possibilities for action. In that sense, perception is the activity of identifying affordances in the environment.

Appearances of value can be understood as perceptions of affordances. This view is actually suggested by Gibson's (1982, p. 407) claim that "the meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords". It follows that to perceive an affordance is to perceive the meaning or value of a feature of the environment. If we see low-level appraisals as the perception of affordances, we can see in what sense emotions present their objects as having a particular significance without taking them to have conceptual or even representational content⁴. To see an object as having a particular significance is simply to see it as affording a particular reaction. In fear, for instance, the object is presented to us as dangerous and that amounts to seeing the object as affording harm and affording escape. In anger the object of the emotion is presented as the perpetrator of an offense and that amounts to seeing the object or situation as affording retribution for a harm or offense. In disgust the object is presented as disgusting and that amounts to seeing the object as affording avoidance or removal. Different emotions may share some affordances. For instance, fear and disgust may both involve an avoidance affordance. That is why it is preferable to characterize low-level appraisals as perceptions of *sets* of affordances. Even if the perception of fear and disgust involve one common affordance of avoidance, they may be distinguished in terms of other affordances one perceives when in the grip of each emotion.

Not any affordances will do, however. It must be possible for there to be a relation of contradiction or incompatibility between low-level appraisals and evaluative judgments. But if low-level

appraisals are perceptions of affordances and affordances are mere possibilities for action it is not clear that there will be this kind of relation. Suppose, for instance, that when one feels fear, one makes a low-level appraisal of the emotion-eliciting object as dangerous and that that amounts to perceiving it as affording avoidance. To say that the object affords avoidance is to say that one possible way in which to react to it is by avoiding it. Now suppose the agent in this case judges that her fear is inappropriate because its object is not dangerous. In saying that it is not dangerous she holds that the object does not actually call for avoidance. That judgment, however, is perfectly compatible with the claim that it affords avoidance, that is, that one possibility for action available to the agent is to avoid the object.

This objection is closely related to another objection made by Shargel and Prinz (2017, p. 115-116). They note that according to Gibson, affordances are relational but objective features of the environment (or the organism-environment system). They are possibilities for action that exist even when they go unnoticed. But that fits rather poorly with the claim that "the meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords". For instance, most humans, most of the time, afford aggression, in the sense that aggression is a possible course of action to adopt in relation to them. It would be completely absurd, however, to hold that part of the meaning my loved ones have for me is captured by the fact that they afford aggression. They, and everyone else, also afford complimenting the shape of their ear lobes. But that is a completely irrelevant affordance.

In order to deal with these two objections, we have to distinguish between mere affordances and solicitations. Recall that to perceive an affordance is simply to pick up ecological information in order to guide our behavior. This process is controlled by the agent's dynamically changing concerns and goals. One cannot identify all of the

⁴ In their discussion of a similar claim, Shargel and Prinz (2017, p. 116) claim that theories that explain the appraisal component of emotions in terms of affordances, hold that "emotions represent affordance". That is not the position being defended here and it involves a misunderstanding of Gibson's theory of perception. The claim being put forward here is not that emotions represent affordances, but rather that the appraisal component of emotions involves the perception of affordances. According to Gibson, perception is direct and need not involve any kind of representation (Chemero, 2009, p. 23). So, according to the view put forward in this paper, even though emotions involve the perception of affordances, they do not have representational content.

potentially infinite affordances available on a given situation and then select a course of action from that list. Rather one collects information with an eye to identifying affordances relevantly connected to one's goals. Affordances are always perceived from the perspective of an action-oriented, concerned agent. To perceive an affordance is not simply to identify a possibility for action, but a possibility for action meaningfully connected to a goal. As a result, the great majority of affordances available in the environment will not be perceived by an organism because they have no bearing on its goals (Rietveld; Kiverstein, 2014, p. 341). The affordances that have a bearing on the organism's goals, in contrast, will be perceived as relevant and as calling for a certain response. If a possibility of action is inimical to one's goals it is not simply identified, but discriminated as a possibility to be avoided – one will be repelled by it. If a possibility of action is conducive to one's goals, it will be perceived as inviting or (depending on how pressing is a particular goal) as soliciting an action.

We can distinguish, then, between two senses of "affords". In one sense, to say that an object affords an action is to say that it offers a mere possibility of action for the organism. In that sense, a chair affords jumping over it. It does not follow that jumping over it is an action that makes sense for me. In a stronger sense, to say that an object affords an action is not simply to say that it offers a possibility for action, but that it offers a possibility for an action that makes sense for the organism – one that the situation allows for, invites or solicits. It is in this stronger sense of "affords" that it is plausible to claim that "the meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords". We can refer to those actions an object or situation affords in the weaker sense as "mere affordances" and to what it affords in the stronger sense as its "solicitations".

A solicitation, in contrast with a mere affordance, is a possibility for action that stands out as particularly relevant to do in the situation at hand. They are experienced as something that stands out to be done (Bruineberg; Chemero;

Rietveld, 2018, p. 5234). This is in line with the phenomenological point made by Dreyfus and Kelly that the environment is not experienced as a manifold of possibilities for action, but as *calling for certain ways of acting* (Dreyfus; Kelly, 2007, p. 52). Gibson makes a similar claim when he holds that we may "feel a special attraction" to the mailbox when we have to mail a letter (Gibson, 2015, p. 139).

Solicitations in this sense abound:

We sense the world's solicitations and respond to their call all the time. In backing away from the 'close talker,' in stepping skillfully over the obstacle, in reaching 'automatically' for the proffered handshake, we find ourselves acting in definite ways without ever having decided to do so. In responding to the environment this way we feel ourselves giving in to its demands (Dreyfus; Kelly, 2007, p. 52).

According to this suggestion, our experience of the environment is one of multiple concurrent solicitations that differ both in relevance and urgency. Some of them are seen as demands while others are mere invitations. Some solicit immediately, others only at some point in the future (Withagen; Araújo; Poel, 2017, p. 12). Furthermore, solicitations change dynamically along these dimensions as the goals of the organisms or features of the environment change. Bruineberg and Rietveld (2014, p. 3) illustrate these points with the example of a rabbit. If the rabbit is hungry, a carrot will be perceived as soliciting eating to a high degree. At the same time, its burrow may be perceived as inviting sleeping. Once the rabbit is no longer hungry, the carrot may still afford eating, but will no longer be perceived as soliciting. Now, other affordances can move forward, so to say, as immediate solicitations. A loud sound nearby may transform the rabbit perception, so that now its burrow is perceived as urgently soliciting hiding. These changes can be helpfully characterized as changes in the *dynamic field of relevant affordances* an organism perceives (Rietveld; Kiverstein, 2014, p. 348).

Appearances of value can be understood, then, as perceptions of a particular configuration of the field of affordances. Something is presented to an

agent as having a particular meaning when some of its affordances figure as solicitations in the field of affordances the agent perceives.

The claim that the low-level appraisals involved in emotions are appearances of value boils down, then, to the claim that emotional episodes involve the perception of a particular configuration of the field of affordances⁵. Consider Griffith's and Scarantino's (2009, p. 441) example of an antelope suddenly confronted with a lion. The antelope in this situation will experience fear. Suddenly the escape affordance it perceives when it perceives the lion will take absolute precedence over all other affordances it was tracking, temporarily obfuscating all other concerns. The escape affordance will be experienced as a very urgent solicitation to flight. Correspondingly, all of the antelope's cognitive, perceptual and motor abilities will be recruited to pick up information about the environment, to discover affordances in the environment that allow for escape and to execute the corresponding actions. The low-level appraisal embodied in the heightened fear the antelope experiences just is the perception of this new configuration of the field of relevant affordances.

Not all emotions need to be so dramatic. A less intense fear (of a distant object, for instance) may take the form of an invitation to keep my distance. If one is overwhelmed with disgust, one's field of affordances may be dominated by the affordance to get rid of the disgusting thing. But a milder disgust can consist in a more subtle change to the field of affordances – such as the inclusion among other affordances of a new affordance, imbued with some relevance, to stay clear of the disgusting thing. An explosive anger may take

the form of an aggression affordance dominating one's perspective, but a more controlled anger can take the form of seeing others as affording denouncing your offender.

This account seems to be on the right track. First, it accounts for the fact that emotions are intentional value-laden states without ascribing conceptual or representational content to them. Perceptions of relevant affordances are perceptions of an object and they present that object as having particular significance (as allowing or calling for this or that response) but they do not conceptually represent their objects. To perceive an affordance is simply to pick up information in order to regulate behavior.

Second, it also accounts for the rational assessment of low-level appraisals. Given that low-level appraisals are perceptions of a certain configuration of the field of *relevant* affordances, they present their situation with which the organism is confronted as allowing or calling, to a greater or lesser extent, for a certain reaction. We can understand how a low-level appraisal thus conceived can conflict with an evaluative judgment. If I judge that the reaction afforded is not called by the situation or does not make sense in that situation then the judgment conflicts with the appraisal. If one experiences fear when faced with a harmless dog, for instance, one sees the dog as calling for evasive maneuvers (that evasion affordance figures prominently in the agent's field of affordances). If one judges that the situation does not call for evasion, then one is assessing one's fear as inappropriate – it presents the situation as calling for a reaction it does not really call for⁶.

Finally, in contrast with Prinz's (2007) embodi-

⁵ For clarity's sake, I should emphasize that the claim here is only that low-level appraisals *consist* in the perception of relevant affordances. This does not amount to the claim that *emotions* consist in the perception of relevant affordances. Low-level appraisals are a component of emotions. So, to the extent the emotions necessarily involve appraisals, they necessarily *involve* the perception of affordances. It does not follow that the perception of affordances is sufficient for one to be in an emotional state. Other components besides the appraisal may be essential for emotions. For instance, one could hold that emotions involve certain physiological changes or characteristic feelings. On certain theories of emotions, the perception of affordances may be sufficient for emotion. For instance, Tappolet (2016) claims that emotions are non-conceptual and non-doxastic appearances of value. A combination of my claim that perceptions of affordances are appearances of value with Tappolet's theory of emotions entails that emotions *consist* in the perception of affordances. But the same is not necessarily true about other theories of emotion. If one holds that sensations of physiological changes are necessarily involved in emotions, then even if my point is conceded, it does not follow that emotions consist in the perception of affordances. I remain agnostic about what is the correct complete theory of emotions and whether or not other components besides appraisals are essential to emotions.

⁶ There is a difficulty here regarding misperception. According to ecological psychology, perception is direct and factive. It follows that there is no such thing as perceptual error or false perception – misperception is not actually perception. The claim that low-level apprai-

died appraisal theory, this view can explain how the bodily changes that accompany emotions are relevant to determine the content of low-level appraisals. As already mentioned, low-level appraisals are tied to bodily changes that prepares us to perform certain actions. These changes underlie action tendencies. The bodily changes associated with fear, for instance, prepare us to a flight-or-fight response. Anger prepares us for confrontation. And so on. Treating low-level appraisals as perceptions of the configuration of the field of relevant affordances allow us to hold that action tendencies are not only a causal antecedent or a contingent side-effect of the appraisal, but part and parcel of it. Perceiving affordances just is picking up information to guide behavior. The perception of the new configuration of the field of affordances consists in the organism's cognitive, perceptual and motor abilities being recruited to identify, track and eventually act on new affordances that pertain to one or more of its goals. And the bodily changes that underlie action tendencies bring about exactly that kind of change. The example of the antelope faced with a lion illustrates that point nicely. Why does its field of affordances change so abruptly? Because

the recognition of the predator automatically gets the antelope ready to escape. This state of action-readiness makes escape salient by actually compelling a flight response (see Shargel; Prinz, 2017, p. 120). A successful flight response requires the antelope to transform informational input (about its surroundings, the position of the predator, and so on) into life-saving behavior. As such the state of action-readiness recruits the organism's perceptual and cognitive abilities to identify possibilities for action that will allow for escape. Now, "all of [the antelope's] cognitive, perceptual, and motoric abilities are recruited to discover and execute an action sequence that evades the predator" (Griffiths; Scarantino, 2009, p. 441). In general, an action tendency brings with it (even if momentarily) a redeployment of the organism's cognitive capabilities to track affordances that are relevant to the goal that action tendency serves⁷. As such, it produces a corresponding change in the organism's field of relevant affordances. The perception of that change is a low-level appraisal⁸. There is, then, a tight connection between the action tendencies and the low-level appraisal associated with an emotion.

sals are perceptions of affordances and that in cases of emotional dysregulation one judges that the perceived affordance is not called by the situation, however, seems to entail that cases of emotional dysregulation are cases of false perception. It seems, then, that the view I am defending is in tension with the theoretical commitments of ecological psychology. I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling attention to this problem. While providing a full answer to this problem would take us too far afield, I will indicate what I take to be a promising answer. One option would be to claim that in cases of emotional dysregulation the agent does not actually perceive the affordances in question. According to ecological psychology, misperception could occur in two ways: either the ecological information available is inadequate or it is not picked up by the agent (Gibson, 2015, p. 233; Carvalho, 2021, p. 295). Neither seems a good fit for cases of emotional dysregulation. Recalcitrant emotions cannot usually be addressed by providing further information for the agent. If cases of emotional dysregulation are cases of genuine perception, then there is a sense in which the object actually affords what the agent perceives it as affording. So, how is it possible to (correctly) assess that perception as inappropriate? Recall that according to ecological psychology, perception consists in picking up information relevant to one's behavior. What counts as relevant depends on the agent's goals. But 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). Cases of emotional dysregulation can be understood, then, as cases in which the appearance of value and the judgment are associated with different goals. The agent perceives certain affordances relevant to the goals the emotional state prioritizes. In this sense, the agent perceives the affordances because he actually picks up information relevant to the prioritized goal. At the same time, however, the agent judges that goal to be inadequate and, thus, that the situation does not really call for the reaction he perceives it as soliciting. This highlights the fact that the judgment at stake is an evaluative judgment: it does not regard simply a matter of fact, but takes a stand respect to the agent's goals.

⁷ The view that the perception of relevant affordances involves states of action readiness is defended by Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014, p. 342): "Solicitation by an affordance is manifest in a state of bodily 'action readiness' [...]. The detection of an affordance that is relevant to what the individual cares about in the particular situation gives rise to an embodied readiness for action [...]. In many real-life situations multiple states of action readiness interact in generating action tendencies and action".

⁸ An anonymous reviewer pointed out that states that are normally not considered emotions can produce changes in an organism's field of affordances. For instance, as you get thirsty, the drinking affordance of a nearby glass of water will become more and more salient. The perception of that affordance as a solicitation will amount to an appearance of value, according to my view. Does it follow that being thirsty involves a low-level appraisal? Not necessarily. One could hold that thirst is simply a sensation of bodily changes. In that case, it may be true that it tends to produce an appearance of value, but that appearance is not constitutive of the feeling of thirst. Alternatively, one could hold that thirst involves that appearance of value, but then it would follow that thirst is an intentional, value-laden and rationally assessable state. That seems false with regard to states such as thirst and hunger. But suppose it was true. Would it follow that thirst is an emotion? Again, it would depend on the theory of emotion one accepts. If one holds that emotions consist in low-level appraisals, then it would follow that thirst is an emotion. To the extent one already admits that it is an intentional and rationally assessable state, that would not, however, be a far-fetched conclusion.

6 Affordances and Ecological Significance

So far, I have argued that low-level appraisals are perceptions of a configuration of the field of relevant affordances. That account gives content to the idea that low-level appraisals are appearances of value. Something seems to have a particular value or significance for an organism when some of its affordances figure in the organism's field of relevant affordances.

If low-level appraisals are perceptions of affordances, appraisal theory cannot be seen as a theory that describes the content of judgments associated with emotions nor as a theory that describes the representational content of embodied emotions. In particular, Lazarus' (1991) core relational themes cannot be seen as descriptions of what an agent thinks when she emotes nor as a description of what the agent's embodied emotions represent. What, then, is appraisal theory a theory of? I follow Griffiths (2004) in holding that appraisal theories are ecological theories that describe the ecological significance of certain aspects of the environment to the emoting organism.

Living organisms are precarious beings that have to constantly regulate their relation to the environment in order to maintain themselves and their form of life. A number of organism/environment relations bear on the organism's ability to maintain its own form of life. These relations are ecologically significant to the organism. They are what Prinz calls the organism's concerns (danger, loss, offense, opportunity etc.). They are organism/environment relations to which the organism must respond appropriately in order to produce adaptive behavior.

To describe the ecological significance of a feature of the environment is to describe the way in which it bears on the organism's ability to maintain its own form of life – how it could potentially affect the organism's viability as a form of life. If appraisal theories are ecological theories, then the dimensions of evaluation identified by a model such as Lazarus' (1991) correspond to aspects of the environment the organism tracks

in order to produce adaptive behavior.

Consider the emotions of a non-human animal. Assume that that animal cannot manipulate evaluative concepts and so is incapable of making judgments and assume that the bodily changes associated with its emotions do not literally represent concerns. If that animal experiences fear, we can still correctly claim that its fear appraises the fear-eliciting object as "an immediate and concrete physical danger". If that description is not a description of what the animal is thinking nor a description of what its bodily states represent, what is it describing? The answer is that it describes the significance of that object for the animal – it describes how it bears on the organism's ability to maintain its form of life.

This view has some important advantages. First, it explains how the fine-grained conceptual distinctions captured in the formulation of core relational themes can apply to organisms that lack the corresponding concepts. As Griffiths (2004, p. 94) puts it, "Neither 'aerial predator' nor 'dark thing overhead of such-and-such apparent size and moving thusly' should really be taken as a literal rendition of the 'what the crow thinks' before exhibiting aerial predator-avoidance behavior, although both point to something meaningful". Second, it allows for the possibility that even the conceptual content of high-level appraisals of adult humans may not be precisely described by the theoretical representation of core relational themes. For instance, the high-level appraisal for shame may involve concepts peculiar to a cultural milieu, such as "dishonor", in such a way that the core relational theme "failing to live up to an ego-ideal" fails to deliver a precise rendition of "what the person is thinking". It also fails to describe the non-conceptual content of the low-level appraisal associated with shame. Nevertheless, it can properly describe the significance of the common aspect of the emotion-eliciting situation that is tracked by high-level and low-level appraisals alike (Griffiths, 2004, p. 96).

The general gloss put on low-level appraisals by appraisal theory should be taken, then, not as a description of how an organism represents

emotion-eliciting features of its environment, but as an ecological description of the significance of those features for the organism.

I have said that to see an object as having a particular significance is simply to perceive some of its affordances as relevant. Taking appraisal theory as an ecological theory allows us to understand in what sense the perception of affordances can embody the kind of complex evaluation summarized in core relational themes. In order to produce adaptive behavior, the organism has to monitor and appropriately react to ecologically significant relations. To do that it must pick up ecological information that is available and regulate its behavior accordingly. But that is just what perceiving affordances consists of. The perception of affordances, then, is how the organism accesses or discriminates the ecological significance features of the environment have for it. In that sense, the perception of affordances is the way in which that significance shows up for the organism. That is how the organism perceives or cognizes that significance. And core relational themes describe the ecological significance of features of the environment. So, perceptions of affordances are perceptions of the very significance the core relational themes describe. That is the sense in which they can embody the kind of complex evaluation summarized in core relational themes.

7 Conclusion

I have argued that the low-level appraisals associated with emotions are best understood as perceptions of a particular configuration of the field of relevant affordances. This view has a number of advantages. It accounts for the fact that emotions are intentional e value-laden states without ascribing a representational, conceptual content to them. It also accounts for the rational assessment of low-level appraisals. And explains their embodiment.

I also argued that in light of this characterization of low-level appraisals, we should understand appraisal theory, and in particular Lazarus' (1991) core relational themes, not as articulating

the conceptual or representational content of emotions, but as describing the ecological significance the emotion-eliciting object has for the emoting organism.

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