Introduction

Here is a proposal about how emotions might function as a perceptual basis for moral judgments. My primary account is particularist in that the judgments it explains are about moral particulars, though to bring it a little closer to traditional intuitionism, I shall try at the end to see how it might apply to moral generalities, at least “default generalities.” It also treats evaluative judgments as primary, though, also in an effort to accommodate traditional intuitionism, I shall reflect a bit at the end about how it might treat deontological judgments. The explanation of the emotion-judgment relation that I’ll offer is based on my notion of emotions as concern-based construals. The paper does not address the moral normativity of emotions or judgments, but only their epistemology, that is, what it is about emotions that makes them fit to serve as the perceptual basis for moral judgments. The concept of moral that guides the discussion is very liberal, covering just about any evaluation of persons and their conduct (taking ‘conduct’ to cover not only their actions but also their characteristic mental life).

After getting oriented with some examples, I’ll discuss first a kind of perception that I call construal. Then I’ll turn to emotions, and suggest that they can be fruitfully understood as concern-based construals, which are thus perceptions of values possessed by situations. Next I’ll examine the possibility that emotions might be a perceptual basis for particular moral judgments of an evaluative kind. Then I’ll consider a complication for this proposal. Finally, I’ll try to see how the view I’ve sketched might apply to moral generalities and to deontological judgments.

**Some Examples of Moral Judgments**

It is plausible to imagine each of the following judgments as having an emotional background:

*What the Underground Man did to Liza the prostitute was outrageously unjust.*

Upon hearing of, or remembering, what the Underground Man did, I felt **indignant** towards him about it.

*Mother Teresa’s compassion for the poor and suffering is saintly.*

When I consider Mother Teresa’s compassionate life’s work, I feel **admiration** [or **reverence**] for her and **gratitude** to God for her devotion to Jesus Christ.

*Mrs. Bennett’s pride in her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she is a rather silly person.*

When I hear her going on volubly and proudly about them, immediately after hearing of George’s plans for benefiting
mankind, I feel a mild contempt for Mrs. Bennett [or embarrassment on her behalf, or amusement at her pride].

*Raymond spoke up courageously at the board of directors’ meeting.*

When I consider what Raymond said, and the hostile reception that he expected from his hearers, I admire his character.

**Perception**

Sensory perception can support judgments in several ways. **FIRST**, I can be told that the double-crested cormorant has a longer gular area than the neotropic cormorant, and once I have learned what the gular area is, I have the wherewithal of a judgment. But I will certainly understand this judgment better if given the opportunity to see examples of the two species side-by-side. **SECOND**, if a reliable cormorant-spotter tells me that the birds on the river behind my house are double-crested cormorants, I still may gain some justification for my belief by stepping out back and looking. **THIRD**, even if my reliable informant is so much better than I at spotting these birds that I gain no justification for my belief by seeing them for myself, I still seem to enjoy a certain epistemic upgrade by seeing them for myself. We might call this upgrade personal acquaintance. There’s nothing quite like perceiving for yourself, whether what’s perceived is the flavor of a fine whiskey, the nastiness of a case of racial injustice, the necessity of a necessary proposition, or the grace of God. The upgrade here seems to be a matter of epistemic proximity or intimacy with the object. Thinking of Linda Zagzebski’s phrase, “cognitive contact with reality,” the upgrade is that the contact is closer or more intimate.

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Emotions, I propose, are a kind of perception that is, in its essence, non-sensory, though it often involves, or is associated with, sensory experience in one way or another. Let me try to make clear the kind of perception I have in mind.

Consider the famous duck-rabbit.

Most people can see this figure either as a duck, or as a rabbit, at will. I shall make three points about this seeing.

**First**, the difference between the experience of seeing the duck and that of seeing the rabbit is a difference in the way the figure presents itself to you. It looks different in the two construals; the two construals are different perceptual impressions. The difference is not well characterized, for example, by saying that when you see the figure one way you think of a duck, while when you see it the other way you think of a rabbit. In the one construal it has that rabbit-look, while in the other it has the duck-look. Presentation or impression is a characteristic of perception, and I suggest that construal more generally is a kind of perception. In this sense, perception is not necessarily factive; false perceptions are still perceptions (they are misperceptions). The point is that as perceptions, they have impression content. Mere judgments don’t have impression content.

My **second** point is that the duck-rabbit shows that perception is not entirely sensory. The different “looks” of the duck and rabbit
don’t result from a sensory difference, because the two different perceptions have exactly the same sensory content while having different impression contents. So there must be a kind of perceptual “input” that is non-sensory. Whence, then, does this difference in presentational content come?

My **THIRD** point is that the perceptual difference between the two construals is made by the way in which the features of the figure are *organized* in perception, and that the organization in turn depends on how the features are *conceptualized*, or to put the matter a little differently, what *roles* the features of the figure are assigned in perception.

For example, the protrusions on the right side of the figure are assigned the role of beak if you’re seeing it as a duck, and they are ears if you’re seeing it as a rabbit. The darker spot in the upper middle of the rounded area is the eye in either case, but it appears to be looking in somewhat different directions depending on which animal you’re seeing, and this is plausibly explained by the “use” you’re making, in the different cases, of the elements of the drawing—the different roles you’re perceptually assigning to them. When you perceptually “assign” any crucial feature of the drawing a different organic role, the *whole* “look” of the drawing changes; and vice-versa, when you make a different whole of it, the significance of each part changes. Role-assignments to features are interdependent with the character of the whole.

We might say that construal is *conceptual* perception, as distinguished from *sensory* perception, inasmuch as it depends, in the duck-rabbit case, on conceptualizing those protrusions on the right either as ears or as a beak; or alternatively, on conceptualizing the whole figure as a picture-duck or a picture-rabbit.

Still, there is sensory information involved in the construals of the duck-rabbit, so the experience is a kind of visual (sensory)
experience, despite its conceptual nature. Furthermore, the duck-rabbit works by way of resemblance; in a modest way, it looks a little bit like both a duck and a rabbit, and if it didn’t, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to construe it as such. For example, if we try to construe it as a bowl of gerberas, we run up against the limits of visual conceptual perception, because the drawing doesn’t provide the visual resources for such construal; it doesn’t look enough like a bowl of gerberas for us (most of us, at any rate) to construe it visually in these terms. The sensory information in the drawing (minimal though it is) provides the needed resemblance to a duck and rabbit, but not to a bowl of gerberas.

Consider now a case that doesn’t depend on resemblance. Some people, upon hearing or seeing the following sentence, do not hear or see it as a syntactically correct, meaningful English sentence:

Fish fish fish fish fish.

It doesn’t make sense to them. It strikes them as just a string of words that doesn’t say anything. But it can make sense to you, if you hear or read it in the right way. To make sense of it, you must organize it perceptually, and you do this by perceptually assigning parts of speech and differential word meanings to each of the five words. One possible assignment is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main subject noun</td>
<td>subordinate clause subject noun</td>
<td>subordinate clause verb</td>
<td>main verb</td>
<td>main clause object noun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Filling in connectors brings out the syntax:

Fish that fish fish fish [for other] fish.

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5 I am grateful to Adam Morton for pointing me to this example.
Or, translating the verb ‘to fish’ with the verb ‘to capture,’ we get,

\[ \text{Fish [that] fish capture capture fish.} \]

We see here the same conceptual perception phenomenon noted in the case of the duck-rabbit. Just as the construal of the figure as a duck requires the assignment of roles to the aspects of the figure, so the construal of the whole string of words as a meaningful English sentence requires that each of the word-tokens be assigned an appropriate grammatical and semantic role. It happens that, like the duck-rabbit, the fish sentence can be construed (read, perceived) in more than one way. It can also be read using the following assignments:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
<th>fish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main subject noun</td>
<td>main verb</td>
<td>main clause object noun</td>
<td>subordinate clause subject noun</td>
<td>subordinate clause verb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paraphrasing again, this time we get,

\[ \text{Fish capture fish [that] fish capture.} \]

Grammatical and semantic roles are concepts, so such assignment is a conceptual activity. But it is performed perceptually. In hearing (or reading) the string as an English sentence, one assigns each word-token its grammatical role by perceiving it properly, and in perceiving each token properly one relates it properly (that is, hears or sees it in some sense-making relation) to its companions and thus perceives (hears or sees) the whole as a well-formed English sentence.

I think the relatively unsophisticated construals of the duck-rabbit exploit the same conceptual-perceptual capacities as the much more sophisticated construals of the fish sentence. It is the ability perceptually to organize into a meaningful whole the parts of
something that admit such organization. (A pervasive example of normal people’s ability to do this is facial recognition. We are extremely competent at recognizing our conspecifics’ faces, and this is a non-analytic capacity that nevertheless obviously exploits differences among noses, eyes, forehead size and shape, distance-proportions among face-parts, etc.) The difference between the linguistic case and the more simply visual cases is that in the fish sentence the conceptual assignments are not made on the basis of resemblance (‘fish’ in no way resembles a fish or the activity of fishing) and indeed, the words in the sentence are not differentiated from one another by any strictly visual or auditory marks. They all sound and look the same. And yet note that even here there are right and wrong ways to construe the string of words; not just any set of role-assignments makes sense.

Perhaps we can see better the point about perception by imagining a contrasting case. Imagine somebody who can’t hear the fish sentence as a sentence, but by some method of calculation and inference can figure out the grammatical assignments of the words. I think that beginning students of Greek, when “construing” a sentence for a teacher, sometimes figure out the grammar and vocabulary of a Greek sentence in this sort of way. That would not be construing in the sense that I’m trying to construct, which essentially involves “hearing” the sentence as a grammatical whole, and further, as grasping the sense that Fish [that] fish capture capture fish or Fish capture fish [that] fish capture.

Construal in this sense is a kind of perception, an impression that results from a power of the mind to synthesize the diverse parts of something that “works” as a whole into an impression of the whole that it works as. Here, perceptual organization differs from purely intellectual or calculating organization.

So there’s a strong analogy between the ability to see the duck-rabbit as a rabbit (or a duck) and the ability to hear the fish
sentence as a sentence. An inability of either kind is both a failure of understanding and a failure of perception in the broad sense that I am proposing. In each case, the person who construes the object in a sense-making way undergoes a phenomenal presentation, a holistic impression, as a result of perceptually organizing a body of “data.”

The two features of construal—its organic, structural, or gestalt character, and its non-sensory presentational or phenomenal character—are not separable, and they conspire to endow construals with the power to yield three potential epistemic goods: understanding, acquaintance, and justification.

**Emotions**

Let’s now turn to emotions. On the view of emotions that I endorse, they are *concern-based* construals. That is, they are perceptions, in the construal sense of the word, in which one or more of the elements going into the construal is a concern. I take it that the construals we’ve looked at so far are not concern-based, and so are not emotions. (If you’re a duck or rabbit lover, or have a duck or rabbit phobia, you perhaps got a mild affective buzz out of seeing the duck-rabbit. Otherwise, I doubt that your seeing it as a duck or rabbit was an emotional experience.)

The idea that emotions are *concern*-based construals is that, for example, you will never feel fear if you don’t care about the thing that you see as threatened, nor anger if you’re not concerned about the thing that is offended against, nor contempt if you don’t care about things and people being worthy of respect. You come into a situation that has emotional potential for you with a (possibly) dispositional concern or desire, or an attachment; you then construe the situation in the terms characteristic of some emotion type, and the situation emotionally appears to you as it does because the terms in which you see the situation impinge on,
connect with, that concern. An instance of fear, for example, might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Concern</th>
<th>Construal</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I care about this child’s wellbeing—&gt;</td>
<td>I construe x as threatening the child’s wellbeing—&gt;</td>
<td>I am moved to protect the child against the threat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each emotion type has a package of concepts. Threat is the lead concept for fear. Wellbeing and protect [avoid] are correlative concepts inasmuch as threat is threat to wellbeing and protection or avoidance is protection of wellbeing against threat or avoidance of loss of wellbeing in the face of threat.

As a concern-based construal, the construal is a perception that is “colored” in value. If the basic concern were not picked up in (integrated into) the construal, then the construal would be merely a construal, like the perception of the duck-rabbit or the fish sentence. It would be a non-affective construal of the child’s wellbeing being threatened. But if it is concern-based, then it is colored with the concern, and is an emotion. The coloration that the construal derives from the integration of the concern is affect. Affect is what makes the construal feel like an emotion and like the particular type of emotion that it is; it is the phenomenal or qualitative difference between an emotion and a nonemotional construal. Affect, which is the way the emotion feels, is not the same as motivation.

In most cases, affect is pleasant or unpleasant. The affective quality of fear is unpleasant, that of hope pleasant. The discomfort of fear can make us want to avoid fear, and so can motivate us, in a sense. But this is not the essential sense in which emotions motivate us. The essential way in which fear motivates a person is not by making him want to avoid the fear, but by making him want to avoid the threat to the wellbeing of whatever he cares about. If
my child is in danger, then I want to preserve my child’s wellbeing against the danger. If my primary concern were to avoid the discomfort of my fear, I might take a drug or learn not to care so much about my child. But if I am afraid for my child’s wellbeing, I will decidedly not want to avoid the fear in such ways as these, and so will not be motivated by the discomfort of the emotion.6

Emotions are motivational by way of a consequent concern, a desire that is produced from the basic concern as processed by the situational construal. In the case of fear, when I see that my child’s wellbeing is threatened, my desire to protect the child against the threat is a “logical” consequence of my care for the child as processed through the construal of him as threatened.

Another indication that affect differs from motivation is that it is possible for an emotion to be felt but not to be motivating. Boredom and some kinds of joy—a happy nostalgia, for example—may not be attended by the desire to do anything in particular (except, perhaps, to continue, or stop, feeling the emotion; but then this is not the essential kind of emotional motivation).

We’ve noticed that things that can be perceived by construal have a structure whose import is appreciated, understood, or made sense of in the construal. The fish sentence has a couple of possible semantic-grammatical structures, the duck-rabbit has a duck appearance structure as well as a rabbit appearance structure, and in each case the construal is a perceptual organization of the structure’s parts such as makes perceptual sense of the structure.

Emotions are differentiated by type in natural languages. They go by names like ‘anger,’ ‘fear,’ ‘envy,’ ‘joy,’ ‘gratitude,’ ‘hope,’ ‘contempt,’ ‘pride,’ ‘shame,’ etc., etc. The types are distinguished from one another by their conceptual structure, in a sense analogous to the syntactical structure of a sentence such as the fish sentence. The conceptual structure of an emotion type is the *schema for a type of situation*—a form of understanding a situation—and it can be indicated by what I call a *defining proposition*, a schematic sentence in the first-person singular, using the concept(s) central to the emotion type so as to reflect the general propositional structure of emotions of that type. For example, the defining proposition for fear (including the consequent concern) is something like the following:

**Fear for Y:** *X presents a threat to Y of a significant degree of probability; may X or its threatened consequences be avoided.*

On the construal view of emotions, when a person fears something, he sees (feels, understands) the situation as having the form expressed in the above defining proposition, and typically wants the situation changed in a way suggested by the form of the construal. Unexpressed in the defining proposition is the concern for the wellbeing of Y on which the construal impinges.

**Emotions and Moral Judgments**

Let us now try to see how an emotion may be the perceptual basis of a moral judgment. Consider the following judgment:

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7 Like the concept of perception introduced earlier, understanding here is to be understood nonfactively; emotional misunderstandings are also understandings in this sense.

8 *Emotions*, p. 195, modified.
What the Underground Man did to Liza the prostitute was outrageously unjust.

The emotion type that seems most appropriate to this judgment is probably indignation, or at least some form of anger. Here is the defining proposition for indignation:

**Indignation:** S has very culpably offended in the important matter of X (action or omission), and is bad; I am very confident of being in a moral position to condemn; S deserves (ought) to be hurt for X; may S be hurt for X.

The situation type depicted in the above propositional form needs to be filled out in a narrative that instantiates the offense and the offender and suggests reasons for attributing culpability for the offense to the offender. Such a situation is narrated in Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground. To enhance its emotional impressiveness, I’ll summarize the story as though you know the man and Liza, though I think any sensitive reader of Dostoevsky’s novella will have felt something like the indignation I’ll talk about.

Imagine that someone tells you the following story. A man you know personally has been insulted and rejected by his associates at a dinner party, and afterwards follows them to a brothel to start a fight, only to find that they have already dispersed into the rooms of the brothel. While there he falls in with a prostitute, Liza, whom you also know well enough to be concerned about her wellbeing. The man wants to assuage his wounded vanity, and has been in the habit of doing so by exercising power over others. After he has slept with Liza he preaches a little sermon to her on the glories of family life and the degradations of prostitution. He pours it on really thick, and by his rhetoric reduces her to a condition of bitter

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9 Part II, sections v–x.
remorse, and of gratitude and admiration toward himself. Overplaying his assumed role of judge and savior he gives her his address on departing, indicating that she may come to him. When she does come to his room several days later in hopes of pursuing the relationship with her sage redeemer, he is humiliated by her seeing his poverty and turns on her with vindictive anger, telling her that he never cared for her at all, doesn’t mind if she degrades herself in prostitution, and was only using her to salve the social wounds he had received at the drinking party. In her disillusionment she is devastated and leaves.

Let us say that your response to the story is indignation against the man for falsely raising Liza’s expectations, shamelessly jeopardizing her to relieve his own emotional pain, and punishing her for doing just what he had invited her to do. In your indignation you are vividly impressed with the nastiness of the situation, the blameworthiness of the Underground Man, and the victimization of Liza. (This evaluative coloring of the facts of the situation is what I call the emotion’s affect.) Your indignation is based on a concern for Liza’s wellbeing and a more general concern for justice. These prior concerns are dispositional in you, and prior to your hearing the story are neither a feeling of any kind nor a desire to do anything in particular. But now, upon hearing the story, you not only feel strongly about the situation, but want to do something in particular. You would like to get hold of the man make him regret deeply and intensely what he has done to her. Toward Liza you feel an aching compassion, which has been aroused by the narrative, and it too involves a desire to do something in particular—in this case, to console her, to assuage her suffering, to let her know that you support her.

Notice that the terms of this construal are just as far from being sensory as the grammatical and word-meaning terms of the construal of the fish-sentence. We perceive the meaning of the fish-sentence without the sentence in any way resembling the
situation it depicts—namely the fact that fish that are captured by other fish capture still other fish. Yet, in the experience of being angry at the Underground Man for his treatment of Liza, he appears to you as culpable, bad, and deserving of hurt for what he has done in a way that is strongly analogous to the way the duck appears to you when you see the duck-rabbit as a duck, and the fish sentence appears to you when you construe it as a grammatically correct sentence. The situation appears to you as a structured whole with a certain complex value. (A notable difference between the construal of the duck-rabbit and the construal of the Underground Man is that the relevant parts of the drawing appear to you simultaneously, while relevant aspects of the Underground Man’s action are collected serially in the course of the narrative.)

_Underground Man has very culpably and shockingly rejected Liza after manipulating her and causing her to trust and care for him, and is a complete jerk; I am very confident of being in a moral position to condemn him; and he deserves to be made to regret vividly and painfully what he has done, as repayment for his vile behavior. May he be made so to feel regret._

This summary is what I call the emotion’s material proposition; it is the actual propositional structure of the emotion token. In your indignation, the parts of the situation depicted in the narrative have come together for you into a whole and impress you powerfully with their (dis)value. The concern-based construal of the depicted situation is your perception of the situation as a meaningful whole with values of particular kinds.

As you read the final sections of _Notes from Underground_, the narrative unfolds, yielding the features which, brought together, become the material for the indignation construal. Nowhere in the text does the word ‘injustice’ occur, and it may not occur to you, the reader, either. But if you are normally compassionate and have
a sense of justice, you will feel the indignation that is expressed in the material proposition above. This felt indignation is then the perceptual basis for your judgment that the UM has treated Liza very unjustly. What do we mean by ‘basis’?

Let’s admit that it’s possible to make this judgment, and to derive it from the story, without feeling indignation toward Underground Man or compassion for Liza. Perhaps we can imagine a highly intelligent person with severe frontal lobe damage who reads the story without emotion and is able to come to the conclusion that the UM has treated Liza unjustly. (Perhaps he was reared among normal people and taught to recognize injustice by its empirical marks, or perhaps earlier in life he was emotionally normal.) He can point to all the right evidence, give all the appropriate reasons, if asked to justify his judgment. So let’s admit that someone could be epistemically justified in making this moral judgment without his own emotion being the basis for the judgment.

Still, one who feels the injustice for himself, by way of his indignation, has an epistemically higher quality judgment than the emotionless person. The perceptual experience of the injustice gives him deeper understanding and more intimate cognitive contact with this moral reality. He is like the person who has seen the double-crested cormorants for himself, as compared with the person whose true beliefs about the birds are based on less direct contact.

I think that in normal cases, ‘base’ might mean two more things. It is true that, by telling the reader the “facts” of the case, the narrative supplies the information necessary to make the judgment. But emotions, as construals, are synthetic, integrating mental states in which these data are organized into a meaningful whole. They are the form in which the understanding of the situation occurs to the reader. In the normal case, this is the priority. It is much less normal for the reader first to come to a non-emotional judgment
that the Underground Man has mistreated Liza, and then, on the basis of that judgment, begin to feel indignation toward him. So one sense in which the emotion is the basis of the judgment is that in the normal case it *precedes the judgment*, just as in many cases sensory perceptions precede empirical judgments.

But if the person who makes the judgment is morally normal (virtuous), then his perceiving the injustice by way of the emotion actually *adds justification* to whatever justification he may derive for the judgment by other means (say, legal evidence, testimony, and whatever calculations may support these). The added justification is like that which a well-trained scientist gains when, after amassing enough less direct evidence to justify a judgment that *p*, he looks in his microscope or telescope and *sees* that *p*. Emotions in general are the way we get perceptual (presentational, noninferential) moral information. This thesis is perfectly compatible with the thesis that only the emotions of the virtuous are highly reliable in this role. The vicious, because their emotions are morally distorted or underdeveloped, have less access to moral information than the virtuous; they understand less and are less “in touch” with moral reality.

**A Complication**

So far, my point has been that emotions function as a kind of perception in which situations are presented to the subject in their evaluative aspect. On my account, the evaluative aspect depends on *the subject’s concern*, as well as his ability to perceive the situation in the *required conceptual way*. The example we’ve

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10 Daniel Jacobson (“Seeing by Feeling: Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 [2005], 387–409) has recently proposed that we think of virtues as skill-like capacities and of moral perception as an output of such capacities. In this paper we have seen that construals are a kind of conceptual perception and so depend on conceptual capacities. Some such capacities (or skills, if you will) are fairly simple, while others are demanding. The capacity to see injustices, on the account that I have
considered accommodates these two suppositions nicely. Indignation matches injustice because the concern basic to indignation is a concern for justice, and the main concepts that indignation trades on are offend (against justice) and culpable (of injustice).

But two of the examples with which I began mention more than one emotion type that might be the perception that corresponds to the moral judgment, and these emotion types may be quite diverse. For example, for the judgment that

Mrs. Bennett’s pride in her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she is a rather silly person,

I suggested that we imagine someone commenting, by way of explanation, that “When I hear her going on volubly and proudly about them, immediately after hearing of George’s plans for benefiting mankind, I feel a mild contempt for Mrs. Bennett.” But alternatively, someone might respond to the situation by feeling embarrassed on her behalf, or amused at her silly pride, and make the same judgment that she is a rather silly person. So contempt, empathic embarrassment, and amusement are all possible ways of emotionally perceiving Mrs. Bennett’s silliness. But contempt, empathic embarrassment, and amusement are very different emotion types. Here is the defining proposition for contempt:

presented here, thus has a skill-like aspect. The perceiver needs to have mastery of the concepts relevant to the relevant emotions, and this mastery is subject to considerable development and sophistication. But on the present account, this is only an aspect of moral perceptual capacities. The other crucial aspect is the moral concern, and it would seem to me odd to think of that as skill-like. Virtues have a skill dimension, but most virtues are not just skills.
Contempt: S is markedly inferior and unworthy in X important way, yet he (she, it) obtrudes, pretending to equal status and worth; may he (she, it) be put in his place (Emotions, 256).

The defining proposition for embarrassment is

Embarrassment: Being concerned to be approved by others or not too apparent to them, I am appearing to others in an uncomplimentary or too revealing light; let me cease to do so (Emotions, 233).

And that for amusement is

Amusement: X, which is at most minimally tragic, disgusting, immoral, or otherwise painful, appears in a delightfully incongruous aspect (Emotions, 308).

As we can see from the defining propositions, contempt is an alienating perception of another, while embarrassment takes the perspective of its own object. I feel contempt for the other, but embarrassment, normally, on my own behalf. Contempt is a species of antipathy, while embarrassment is a species of (self-) sympathy. Thus empathic embarrassment is an uncomfortable sense of solidarity with the other person. Contempt arises out of a concern for some kind of superiority or excellence, a concern that the object of contempt contravenes; unlike empathic embarrassment it does not arise out of an attachment to, love for, or pro-attitude towards the object of contempt, and is rather predisposed by a lack of positive concern for the other or even a concern to diminish the other. Empathic embarrassment presupposes a concern that the other appear in a good light, and is therefore an uncomfortable construal of the other as appearing in a bad light.
But emotions of both types can be the perceptual basis of the judgment,

_Mrs. Bennett’s pride in her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she is a rather silly person._

Here is how contempt, embarrassment, and amusement might be instantiated in this case:

**Instantiation of contempt:** _The pride that Mrs. Bennett shows in insisting on the excellence of her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she has a silly mind; in this she is alien to what is excellent and should be apportioned the trivial status among us that she deserves._

**Instantiation of empathic embarrassment:** _The pride that Mrs. Bennett shows in insisting on the excellence of her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she has a silly mind, but she is my friend [family member, associate, fellow human being]: if only she did not appear so silly to our fellows! (Notice especially the ‘our.’)_

**Instantiation of amusement:** _The pride that Mrs. Bennett shows in insisting on the excellence of her culinary arrangements is so disproportionate to their value as to suggest that she has a silly mind; the incongruity between the excellence she pretends to and the excellence she exhibits is delightful._

Emotions are situational concern-based construals with the phenomenal or qualitative character of affect. The affect colors the situation with value: Mrs. Bennett’s silliness in making such a fuss
about her culinary arrangements comes across as silliness. In a way analogous to the way that seeing the cormorant for oneself may yield a higher quality judgment that it is a cormorant than merely judging it to be so, say on the basis of testimony, “seeing” the silliness by way of the contempt, empathic embarrassment, or amusement yields a higher quality moral judgment than merely judging her, without affect, to be silly. In the emotion we feel (perceive) her silliness in its bearing or import. Thus we go beyond merely registering or noting that she is silly.

But what about the fact that emotions of more than one type can supply the affect with which the evaluative quality of Mrs. Bennett’s silliness is perceived? After all, silliness seen through the eye of empathic embarrassment is a pretty different quality than silliness seen through the eye of contempt.

We may be tempted to deny this—to suppose that if emotions can be the perceptual basis of moral judgments, then the emotion types and the moral judgment types should correspond in a regular way. Linda Zagzebski\(^{11}\) seems to make this assumption. She divides the judgment types along the lines of division of the thick evaluative concepts and then, to make the connection to emotions, calls these “thick affective concepts.” Examples of thick affective concepts are pitiful, dogmatic, contemptible, rude, petty, tacky, brutal, lie, kind, etc. (pp. 108–9, 114). Then she says that to each thick affective concept corresponds an emotion type (p. 115). For Zagzebski, emotion types are “defined” by the thick affective concepts that shape the intentional objects of their instances. For example, there is an emotion corresponding to kind, an emotional way of responding to someone who, or some action that, is kind; and another for seeing people and actions that are dogmatic, another for those that are petty, and so forth. Many of her emotion types are nameless;

and they differ from the ones that are lexically identified in natural languages.

For example, she says we perceive an action as rude only when we feel offended by it. But it seems to me that rude remarks and actions can be evaluatively perceived in many affective ways. One may sometimes respond with offense, but also one might feel contempt for the speaker, or amusement, gratitude, joy, or fear. Furthermore, it seems to me that, in context, any of these affective responses might be the right response (or a right response), one that nails the (an) evaluative truth. Rudeness has different kinds of value, depending on context.

Returning to Mrs. Bennett’s silliness, here is what I think we should say: At a great enough height of abstraction, the persons who perceive her silliness with empathic embarrassment, contempt, and amusement all perceive the same evaluative quality, namely, her silliness. And so at that height of abstraction they will all make the same judgment: she is silly (or perhaps: her pride is silly.) But closer to the ground it is evident that they are not seeing the same quality. One is seeing contemptible silliness, another lamentable silliness, and another laughable silliness. If all three form a judgment on the basis of their perceptions, then they form three different judgments. The differences are obscured by the abstract formulation ‘she is silly.’ They can all sincerely assert that, but the fuller truth about their perceptions and corresponding judgments will require further explanation to formulate.

But if we say this, haven’t we created a problem for ourselves, a problem that will send us back in the direction of Zagzebski’s claim that perception of such properties as silliness requires that a single emotion type be dedicated to each distinct evaluative property? The argument might go like this: silliness is perceived

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12 I thank Adam Pelser for raising this question, and for discussion of it.
in each of the three cases: by way of contempt, by way of empathic embarrassment, and by way of amusement. But silliness is itself an evaluative property, and we have claimed that the most essential way to perceive evaluative properties is by way of emotions. But if silliness is perceived via each of the three quite different emotion types, and is in some sense the same property in each case, then it can’t be right to think that these three types of emotion are the most basic way that silliness is perceived. There must be yet another emotion type that accounts for the perception of silliness itself—whatever is common to the contemptible silliness, the amusing silliness, and the lamentable silliness that are perceived by these three emotions.

The problem with this argument, as I see it, is that its conclusion is false. If we look for an emotion type that targets silliness in itself, apart from any context that lends one value or another to it, we come up empty-handed. Silliness seems to be always embedded in some context in which it emerges as having one value or another other than just plain silliness. If this is so, then the faulty premise is the one that claims that silliness is itself an evaluative property.

But if silliness is not an evaluative property, how does it come to be so at home in evaluative or even moral judgments like the one in our example? It is certainly a different kind of property from being five feet tall or having red hair, and the difference is in the direction of being evaluative. True, we can imagine somebody feeling contempt or empathic embarrassment for another because he is five feet tall or has red hair, but it would take a very special context to make sense of the idea that such a perception might be a veridical moral perception that could issue in the true judgment that the person is contemptibly or lamentably red-headed or five feet tall.

It is popular these days to distinguish “thick” evaluative concepts like kind and tacky and silly and contemptible from “thin” ones like
good and bad. But perhaps we need more distinctions among the “thick” ones than we are usually given. It seems to me that contemptible and lamentable are rather densely thick, while rude and brutal and petty are less so, and tacky and silly and dogmatic are still less evaluatively dense. I say so because it seems to me that contemptible and lamentable are quite determinately evaluative in particular, pretty constant ways, while on the other end of the spectrum silly and rude admit of a wide range of evaluative variations. ‘Tacky,’ ‘silly,’ and ‘dogmatic’ are perhaps more naturally or frequently qualified by ‘lamentably’ than by ‘delightfully,’ but it is not hard to imagine something being delightfully tacky, silly, or dogmatic. It is harder or less likely something be delightfully brutal or petty, but not impossible. But delightfully contemptible or lamentable seems downright incoherent.

Yet all these concepts seem to be broadly evaluative, as compared with redhead and five feet tall. They belong in contexts of evaluation; they invite or lend themselves to evaluation in a way that the merely factual concepts do not. Though silliness does not have, in itself and across all contexts, any determinate value, it lends itself to various values, and naturally takes on values, in a way that red and five feet tall do not. So the premise in the objection is not exactly wrong in calling silliness an evaluative property, but it would be wrong to assimilate it without qualification to properties such as the contemptible and the lamentable. We might call silliness and rudeness parasitically or partly parasitically evaluative properties since as evaluative properties they live off of, depend on, more robustly thick evaluative properties. I think that evaluative properties can be more or less parasitic or dependent. Brutality seems to me to be a far more evaluatively independent property than silliness.

The idea of parasitically evaluative properties seems to lead to a distinction between two kinds of thickness of evaluative properties,
descriptive thickness and evaluative thickness. Thickness in an evaluative concept is usually thought to be its descriptive specificity. *Bad* has almost no descriptive specificity, while *cruel* has quite a lot. To say ‘x is bad’ is to convey little information about what kind of thing x is factually, while to say ‘x is cruel’ conveys quite a lot. Silliness has quite a bit of descriptive specificity, but it’s short on what we might call evaluative specificity, since its evaluative import can be specified in a variety of ways, as we have seen. Thus silliness is descriptively pretty thick, but evaluatively pretty thin. To belabor the point, *good*’s thinness consists in its being parasitic on descriptive concepts: thus we specify good *tea*, good *man*, good *axe*, etc. (‘x is good’ tells us next to nothing about what x is.) Similarly, *silly*’s thinness consists in its being parasitic on evaluative concepts: *lamentable* silliness, *amusing* silliness, *contemptible* silliness. (‘x is silly’ tells us little about x’s value—though, I am saying, it does suggest that x has some kind of value, whereas ‘x is five feet tall’ does not.)

**Deontological Judgments and Evaluative Generalities**

So far, this paper has been entirely about the perception of evaluative qualities and the judgments that may be based on them. I have argued that, because of their perceptual nature, emotions can contribute to moral judgments such epistemic goods as justification, understanding, and intimacy of cognitive contact with reality. How might our ruminations apply to deontological judgments—judgments to the effect that someone ought to do something, or ought to have done something? How might emotions contribute here?

It seems to me that the range of relevant emotion types is much narrower for this kind of judgment than for evaluative ones, and that the emotions apply in a different way.
Ethicists who have thought deontologically and also incorporated emotions into their account of moral judgments have often fixed on two emotion types in particular: anger (or resentment) and guilt. So we might start here. Our reaction to the underground man’s treatment of Liza is a graphic case. It seems reasonable to conclude from our angry perception of him that he ought not to have done what he did. Evaluatively, our emotion tells us that the underground man treated Liza unjustly; deontologically, we can conclude from this that he ought not to have done what he did.

Ought and ought not seem to me too thin, too abstract, to be objects of perception; that is why I say we would “conclude” the deontological judgment from our perception. Furthermore, if the question is about whether an as yet unperformed action would be obligatory, permissible, or impermissible, then we might imagine (with sufficient narrative context) performing the action and not performing it, and our emotional reaction to it. If we see that we would feel guilty if we performed it, we could conclude that it is impermissible; if we would feel guilty if we didn’t perform it, we could conclude that it was obligatory; and if we wouldn’t feel guilty in either case, we could conclude that it is permissible either to do it or not to do it. This method presupposes that our responses to cases are reliable, and of course not everybody’s are reliable, and perhaps everybody’s are under certain circumstances unreliable. I would say that people with virtues like compassion, justice, and objectivity about themselves and their emotions would be the most reliable sources of correct deontological judgments here.

So if our guilt-disposition is well formed, then the emotion will lend some justification to our judgment. But the understanding and the intimacy of contact with reality would seem to me to attach less

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13 See, for example, Alan Gibbard (Wise Choices, Apt Feelings) and John Rawls (A Theory of Justice).
to the oughtness than to the value from which we concluded the oughtness—again, because *ought* is such a thin moral property. Obligation by itself doesn’t offer much to be understood or to have epistemic contact with.

Since the intuitionism that I’ve described is particularist, this view would differ from traditional intuitionism in which the intuitions are responses to proposed *principles*. But I suppose that affective intuitionism\(^\text{14}\) might approximate an intuitionism about principles by telling a similar story about how principles are to be tested. Given a principle to test, the affective intuitionist might try instantiating it with as large an assortment of imagined cases as his or her time and imagination would allow (with special attention to counter-cases), testing each case with his or her virtual anger/guilt response. Then he might tentatively generalize: it seems that proposed principle #1 is pretty general, whereas proposed principle #2 is less so; and so forth. But since the procedure would involve a double inference—first from the emotion to the deontological property of the case, and second from the collection of cases to a generalization—the resultant judgments would hardly be the direct products of “intuition” posited by traditional intuitionists.

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\(^{14}\) See Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions*. 