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# THE PARADOX OF AXIOLOGY. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO VALUE THEORY

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## abstract

*Are values more than measures of our needs and desires or internalized social and cultural rules of behaviour, originating in cultures and devoid of any universally accessible objectivity? Is there a place for values in a world of facts? If so, how can values preserve their ideality and normativity? If not, how can value judgements be true or false? Max Scheler's Material Axiology is the best answer Classical Phenomenology provides to this dilemma. Yet Material Axiology, in particular material ethics of values, is largely ignored or looked down upon for being based on unclear presuppositions. This paper tries to provide a fresh start by clarifying the bottom-up approach characteristic of phenomenology with an exercise in experimental phenomenology in which I will analyse the actual experience of certain aesthetic values in emotionally qualified perception.*

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## keywords

*experimental phenomenology, value theory, metaethics, material axiology*

### 1. The Paradox of Axiology

What is the Paradox of Axiology?

There is a puzzle about the very nature of values that makes the possibility of their existence seem paradoxical. It rests on an apparent *opposition between values and reality*, an opposition or contrast which philosophy has always registered. For example, it is at the root of Plato's characterization of Goodness as "beyond substance", as well as of Hume's dichotomy of facts and values and of the Naturalistic Fallacy that Moore cautions against. Even Kant's purely deontological foundation of ethics is best understood as a response to the Paradox of Axiology. The Paradox of Axiology has been rephrased, in contemporary metaethics, as the Dilemma of Metaethics, that is a dilemma concerning the status of value properties. If they were real or natural properties, they would seem to lose their essentially normative character. But, if that's so, then in order to preserve their normative character they would have to be creatures of another world. The presently available metaethical accounts of value purport to offer solutions to this dilemma.

The Paradox of Axiology is a serious one, albeit a "paradox" only in the weak sense of being something "beyond common opinion". Yet, it teaches us a lot about the very nature of values. Moreover, it calls our attention to something that is in fact part of the "whatness" of values *as they are experienced*. The Paradox existed long before its technical metaethical conceptualization was introduced. It is constantly "lived" as an tension between the ideal and the real. *Ideality is an essential feature of values*. It is also a paradoxical one, for positive values are never as vividly given as they are in the painful recognition of their absence on earth, when the corresponding goods are missing, which most of the time (but not necessarily) means that the corresponding negative values are realized in their place. Through real injustice we come to see what justice is, and that what a just society is, is what most actual societies are *not*. The *content* of justice is exemplified by what societies *could* be and *ought* to be like, or by *ideal* societies.

One of the most popular strategies for explaining this Paradox away is to remove from value terms their value *content*, or *matter*. I call the result of this move the No-Matter-of-Value Thesis. We shall explore it further below.

I shall argue for following claims:

- C1. The No-Matter-of-Value Thesis makes the Paradox of Axiology unsolvable.
- C2. Experimental Phenomenology<sup>1</sup> shows that the No-Matter-of-Value Thesis is false.
- C3. Experimental Phenomenology provides a foundation to Material Axiology<sup>2</sup>.

Most past and present conceptualizations of the Paradox are astoundingly silent about value experience and the life world, that is, about what appears to be the source of ordinary talk on value. So, in most cases, the *data* needed for any theory of value aiming to solve the Paradox are simply ignored.

In the contemporary debate on metaethics the problem is structural. For it depends on a methodological feature apparently inherited from the meta-linguistic origins of metaethics, namely, the exclusive focus on terms and concepts, as opposed to the corresponding non-conceptual contents or data. The second-order level of metaethical discussions induces authors to address the “nature” or the “status” of value properties in general, most of the time, without any intuitive exhibition and analysis of their instances. I’ll call this way of arguing at a conceptual level only, without regard for phenomenal contents, a *top-down strategy*.

Much gets lost, though, concerning the very nature of values when the fact that they are qualities that can be experienced independently of their explicit conceptualization is ignored. Take *ferocity*. Infants may be frightened by the ferocious look of a warrior’s mask, yet without having at their disposal the concepts of ferocity and of mask. This says something about the nature of values.

*Ferocity* is a typically “thick” value term. Now, the whole metaethical debate hinges on finding a satisfactory solution to the fact-value dichotomy, whether it is understood in Humean or Moorean terms. But this dichotomy, as is well known, faces apparent counterexamples in so called “thick” value-terms, or value concepts.

Such terms as “ferocious”, “courageous”, and “cruel” – or, for that matter, “graceful” or “vigorous” – denote “thick” concepts, or concepts provided with *descriptive content*, as opposed to “thin” terms such as “right” or “good” which only seem to express normativity apart from any descriptive content.

Thick concepts would appear to escape the dichotomy. Edmund Husserl discussed this issue at the very beginning of the last century<sup>3</sup>, long before it became a matter of controversy in the Fifties between Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch on one side, and Richard Hare on the other<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Albertazzi (2013), Husserl (1970a), pp. 203-209.

2 Scheler (1973).

3 Husserl (1970), Vol I, §§14-16; Hans Kelsen dismissed Husserl’s rejection of the dichotomy – much too hastily, I think – in his *Allgemeine Theorie der Normen* (1979), cf. Kelsen (1996).

4 Philippa Foot argues against the arbitrariness attached to the usage of “prescriptive” or “action guiding” words such as the names of virtues, or of words like “danger” or “pride” in case there where there is no “internal relation” between “commending” or evaluating and the non-evaluative meaning of these words (Foot 1978, pp. 83-104, the text was originally a paper delivered at Bedford University in 1958). Iris Murdoch opens up a much wider horizon in her criticism of “voluntarism” in value theory, targeting both (Sartrean) existential philosophy, with its reject of any rational justification of choices, as well as “linguistic” or Oxford moral philosophy, with its prescriptivism rejecting experience, research into the moral meaning of facts, learning, and discouraging of what Murdoch calls *attention*, which she explains thus: “I have used the word ‘attention’, which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (Murdoch 1970 p. 33). As for Richard Hare, while his book on *The Language of Morals* (1952) reinforces Hume’s dichotomy as a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive language (the language of morals being the latter), the challenge of thick value terms is addressed in his (1981) *Moral*

## 2. Claims

## 3. The No-Matter-of-Value Thesis

Thick value terms can be used to challenge Hume's claim that one cannot derive an *Ought* from an *Is*. If, for example, being courageous is a professional quality of a warrior, then a warrior *ought* to be courageous. Or, put in terms of truth makers, there is a quality rich in descriptive content – courage – which makes an *Is* value statement true or false. That quality is the referent of such expressions as “Jack is courageous” (which is contingently true or false), and “An ideal warrior is courageous” (which is a necessary truth).

The standard move suggested by a top-down approach is to split a thick concept into two parts, i.e., a descriptive content and a normative operator, where the descriptive content is and has to be a purely “factual” or “natural” content. This was the move first made by Kelsen (in response to Husserl) and by Richard Hare (in response to Philippa Foot).

Bernard Williams approvingly sums up this move in a very clear way:

The clearest account, as so often, is given by Hare: a term of this kind involves a descriptive complex to which a prescription has been attached, expressive of the values of the individual or of the society. ... It is essential to this account that the specific or ‘thick’ character of these terms is given in the descriptive element. The value part is expressed, under analysis, by the all-purpose prescriptive term *ought*<sup>5</sup>.

On this account, value concepts have no axiological *contents*. Either they are thin, and just prescriptions, or they are thick, and all the content they have is factual. Let's call this statement the No-Matter-of-Value Thesis.

This thesis is, in fact, a consequence of Moore's thesis of irreducibility, *plus* Moore's claim that value concepts are non-analyzable. No matter how a thick value concept is analyzed in factual terms, there will be a residual value – such as the goodness of being courageous – that resists analysis in non-axiological terms. Otherwise, you run afoul of the naturalistic fallacy.

Now, this thesis is false. The rest of this paper is devoted to arguing against this very popular mistake, which I take to be caused by the kind of value blindness that goes along with a top-down approach.

#### **4. The Falsity of the No-Matter-of-Value Thesis**

Suppose you can analyse a thick value term in the way just suggested. So, a ferocious expression expresses preparedness to behave in a ferocious way, and a ferocious behaviour is such and such a behaviour, e.g., a fierce, wild, violent one. This, of course, sets us on the path of an infinite regress, for here ferocity is analysed in terms of other value qualities. Suppose, then, that ferocity just “supervenes” on a class of animal behaviours which can be described in purely “factual”, say, “natural” terms, or that the predicate “is ferocious” can be analysed in terms of those animal behaviours plus an “all-purpose prescriptive (negative) term *ought*”. Now, is there any *factual* or *natural* property shared by these animal behaviours and, say, a ferocious joke, a ferocious ideology, a ferocious question? Is there any *natural* property common to elegant things, such as an elegant dress, an elegant apartment, an elegant gait, or a piece of elegant prose? It does not seem that we can find one.

And yet, we are usually able to tell ferocious or elegant things from those which are not. How is that possible? An obvious answer is that we do so by employing the concept of ferocity. But if the preceding argument is valid, then this concept is not analyzable in terms of factual contents plus a prescriptive operator. So, the real question is: What is the source of this concept? Given that it cannot be a given matter of fact, should we not then take it to be a given

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*Thinking* with the two-components theory (see below and footnote 5).

<sup>5</sup> Williams (1985), p. 130. This is the so-called Two Components Theory. (Putnam 2004, p. 41).

matter of value, as it were? Perhaps its source is, in other words, a non-conceptual or pre-conceptual *axiological* content or datum. Should we not then consider, at least as a hypothesis, that what a thick concept may more or less aptly capture is the *content of a given value as such*, its ideal and normative “matter”, which we have, so to speak, in front of us and “consult”?

Now, this kind of data or given non-conceptual contents is exactly what a top-down approach to value is blind to.

Our first move, then, is to make explicit the methodological rule of phenomenology as a bottom-up approach (in value theory but not in that alone):

(Meth): No theoretical problem about a type of thing *S* should be addressed without recourse to the intuitive presence of some token or instance, *s*, of *S*.

(Meth) is just an application of phenomenology’s primary charge, “Back to the things themselves”, or *the principle of the priority of the given over conceptual construction*. (Meth) is the means by which the oft-neglected world of everyday experience becomes again the privileged object of philosophical inquiry.

Our bottom-up approach can be introduced with a simpler type of case, the sort in which perception of value is in some sense “added to” perception in the most literal sense, i.e., sensory perception. We shall start with some examples of a type of quality that tradition recognizes as being “given to perception”, in *aesthesis*, that is, aesthetic qualities.

Claim 3 needs the support of experimental argumentation. To that end, some images will be shown that exemplify *ferocity* as a non-conceptual content or a *value quality*. Experimental Phenomenology will help us analyze this quality in terms of a typically tertiary quality, or *quality of demand*. This quality of demand is a global feature of perceptual configurations, constraining possible (co)variations of their contents, in all possible worlds in which ferocity is instantiated. Such a global quality *is there*, given in experience, as a *matter of value*. Its normative power, far from being “lost in description” – as if in principle *descriptive* language could not convey *ideality* – pertains to the qualified object essentially, or in all possible worlds in which it exists.

Material axiology is a generalization of this discovery, according to which value terms do have a descriptive axiological content, and a very rich one, which can be analysed by reference to objects’ axiological qualities.

Here, in Figure 1, is an example readily available on the internet of a ferocious expression. Many things are apparently ferocious, and yet it is quite difficult to find a “natural” or “factual” property that might be shared by everything that has a ferocious appearance, ranging from a warrior’s mask, certain animal behaviours, or a scene of Artaud’s cruelty theatre, to an ideology, or even some jokes. But we rightly distinguish beautiful from ugly things, cruelty from mildness. The mask depicted in Figure 1 could not possibly be deemed mild or elegant.

How can we identify cruelty and ferocity? By the concept *cruel*? But there is evidently no *factual* property shared by cruel jokes and, say, cruel meals!

Yet, as Iris Murdoch argues at length, it is always possible to improve one’s understanding of thick value concepts, such as *impudence* or *courage*. How is that possible, given what I’ve just said?

If we try to resolve the problem by appealing to the mask’s ferocious appearance, a natural answer would be that there is in its appearance a matter to be looked at – and *felt*. A matter

## 5. Back to the things themselves. The bottom-up approach of Experimental Phenomenology

## 6. Some images

of value, though, rather than a matter of fact. I've chosen a mask deliberately, for a mask is a means of make believe. When wearing such a mask, one can appear ferocious without having to be ferocious – regardless of the purpose this disguise may serve, whether it is ritual, theatrical, or a matter of carnival farce. A mask is an object under epochè, like any aesthetical object. It presents us with a quality which might be instanced in reality – the ferocious expression of an actual warrior – but which we grasp, so to speak, in the “abstract”, divorced from any genuine exercise of ferocity.



Figure 1

Let's briefly practice “contemplation,” or, in Murdoch's terms, the improvement of our *insightful* understanding of ferociousness. We certainly have a lot of matter to conceptualize, matter that is first given to visual-cum-emotional perception. We are “struck” by more and more features, which we may or may not be able to adequately capture in words (not just *any* word will do!). We detect a quality of *wildness* or *savageness* which suggests, despite the evident shape and aspect of a human face, a *lack of humanity*. We sense *hostility*, *aggressiveness*, *rapaciousness* and *greed*. We are scared by the face's *fury* (seen in the eyes) and apparent *mordacity* (visible in the teeth). The grim look of the mask exhibits a power of *tearing apart* and destroying in its sharp and pointed features...

This description serves as a counterexample to the idea that value terms are just action-guiding terms. When I describe this mask as “ferocious” I am not warning you against any menace to your life or integrity, nor am I prescribing you to avoid encounters with it, etc. The point also works as a counterexample both to Hare's prescriptivism and to emotivism. For the very same quality might be manifested in an act of cruelty, too. You would no doubt be right to fear being killed. And, were that to actually happen, it would be awkward if we then had to choose between either (a) admitting that “It was a cruel, a ferocious act” is a value judgment while denying the judgment a truth value or (b) admitting that the judgment corresponds to the pertinent facts while denying it the status of a value judgment. That awkwardness indicates, as is usually the case with thick terms, the untenability of the fact/value distinction. So, here a Two-Component Theory à la Hare (ascribing the judgment a descriptive content plus a prescriptive force) might help. But again, it would be no help for understanding the related case of the mask, despite the fact that the value quality manifested there is exactly the same.

Expressive qualities are a subclass of value qualities that typically “present” the agents having them as other *selves*, namely, as subjects (or quasi-subjects) of emotion and action. It is by

means of these qualities that we usually take something to be another self. They present us with socially relevant properties of encountered agents and their actions. But, when experienced in a purely aesthetical attitude, expressive qualities can be explored in a “detached” way, so that the pertinent emotions can be vividly felt without becoming *reasons for action* (think of thrillers, horror pictures, and so on). Aesthetic experience switches off action and at the same time deepens cognition. Figure 2 gives a further example, this time presenting a familiar scenario from ordinary life, of the “abstraction” involved in the appreciation of aesthetic value.



Figure 2

In comparison with the previous examples, the Halloween Pumpkin is a more “abstract” version of a ferocious expression. It is an almost simplified or schematic version of ferocity (an “eidos” of it?). You’ll notice nonetheless how well the salient features of apparent ferocity are preserved. In fact, a matter of real life and action has become pure play here with the help of this “aesthetic” object and our taking on the “right” attitude toward it. In aesthetic experience one apprehends the quality without being moved to action, thus taking it up in a dispassionate cognitive attitude. In pretense, as in some kinds of plays and games, the motivational power of qualities is in the “as if” mode, but you enact corresponding “as if” actions in relation to them. Aesthetic experience switches off real action and switches on value cognition. This is especially true in the case of expressive qualities. A brief foray into the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century visual art will make the point clear.

In the Preface of an old English translation of Vassily Kandinsky’s *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (1926) we find a nice anecdote on the meaning of “abstract” painting:

Upon his return to Munich, one evening there occurred at dusk the magical incident of his seeing merely the form and tone values in one of his paintings. While not recognizing its subject, he was not only struck by its increased beauty but also by the superfluity of the object in painting, in order to feel its spell. It took him fully two years to crystallize this miraculous discovery<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Kandinsky (1926), p. 7. The date of this discovery is supposed to be about 1908. Even if Rebay does not report this detail, the tradition has it that the picture that struck Kandinsky in this way was not one of his own, but rather Monet’s *Sheafs in the sun*. The (1926) treatise was published sixteen years after his first one, *Das Geistige in der Kunst* (1910), and is based on Kandinsky’s teaching at the Bauhaus in Berlin (1921-24). It’s a nice coincidence that while the first treatise, written in Munich, is more or less contemporary with the flourishing of the Munich psychologist Theodor Lipps’ studies on empathy and aesthetics and the critical, very productive discussion of them within the Phenomenological Circle of Munich, animated by Scheler and attended by two of the most significant phenomenologists of aesthetics, Moritz Geiger and Dietrich von Hildebrand, the second one, crystallizing his teaching



The quotation conveys all that is needed to appreciate the series of visual experiments Kandinsky provides in the appendix of this remarkably valuable work. Let's examine just two examples. So-called "abstract" painting only makes explicit – and does so in a programmatic way – what has always been true of painting, regardless of the views the painter or mainstream opinion about painting in different epochs. It highlights how visual art, correctly enjoyed, lets us see the *how*, and not only the *what*, of visible things. Generalized, we could say that aesthetic information is about the *how* and not the *what*, or that it's about *whatness*, but only insofar as it can be made apparent independently of whether and where it exists, or whether it is really as it appears. Painting is about qualities, even those making up the solidity and three-dimensionality of the painting's subject matter. It is about the gravity and seriousness of what is real, as is particularly evident in Cezanne's use of the canvas. Qualities are the real "subject" of even the most figurative and "classic" painting. Geometry itself appears as the quality of an orderly world, an intelligible cosmos encompassing the City of Humans. That is true, for instance, of certain paintings by Piero della Francesca.

Once you realize that the visual arts help to free visual perception from the practical tasks it serves in ordinary life and to free visual contents from their function of orienting you in reality, the supporting role of the "subject" (e.g., a depicted object) in such work is no longer necessary for appreciating the "how", the pure visual content of possible perceptual worlds. Indeed, there is no need for a return to Platonism to understand Klee's dictum that painting does not reproduce the visible, but makes even the "invisible" visible.

Klee's dictum refers to what I've called value cognition. By "contemplating" visual art we come to "improve our understanding" (as *per* Murdoch) of expressive qualities. Actually, we come to improve our discriminative perception of them. More examples will prove helpful here.

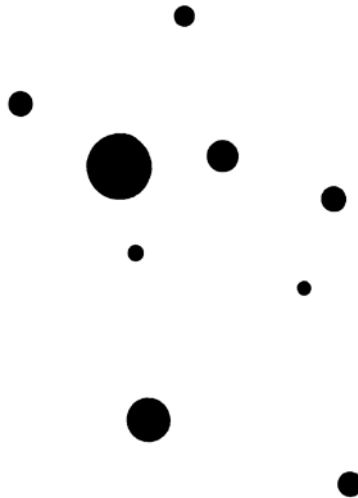


Figure 3. From V. Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*<sup>7</sup>

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years in Berlin, is more or less contemporary to the flourishing of the Berlin School of Gestalt Psychology in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, before the Nazi catastrophe.

<sup>7</sup> Kandinsky (1926), *Anhang* (Appendix), Diagram 20, (1946) p. 152.





Figure 4. From V. Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*<sup>8</sup>

The “titles” given by Kandinsky to these drawing are respectively: “9 points in ascent (emphasis upon the diagonal d-a through weight)” (Figure 3<sup>9</sup>); and “Diagonal tensions and counter-tensions with a point which brings an external construction to inner pulsation” (Figure 4), The first is meant to illustrate the role of the point in visual form and the latter the role of the line.

Both configurations feature a striking *dynamism*, a quality we perceive or feel even if we know that the lines or the points on the paper are in fact motionless. Theodor Lipps (1906) describes this kind of quality as presenting “the life of lines”, as it were:

[A] movement, such as stretching out, growing longer, self-restricting, abruptly starting and ending, or steady sliding, swinging up and down, bending, stooping, squeezing and expanding. All these predicates do not refer to geometrical features of the form, but denote activities...<sup>10</sup>.

We can call the qualities Lipps refers to as *dynamic qualities*. The drama of the lines and the rising of the points in Kandinsky may well be a good (almost) contemporary example of what Lipps has in mind<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Kandinsky (1926), Anhang (Appendix), Diagram 20, (1946) p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Kandinsky rejects customary distinctions of “the graphic” and “the pictorial”, according to which line is the essential element of graphics but is “in painting, contrary to its nature and, therefore, forbidden”. Here is his rationale: “This is a characteristic example of the existing confusion in concepts: that which can easily be segregated and placed in separate categories is mixed together (art, nature), and, on the other hand, the things that belong together (painting and graphics) are carefully separated from each other. The line is considered here to be a ‘graphic’ element and not to be used for ‘pictorial’ purposes, although an elementary difference between ‘graphics’ and ‘painting’ cannot be found and could never be established by the theorists mentioned”. Kandinsky (1946), p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Lipps, T. (1903-06), p. 184. Our translation.

<sup>11</sup> Even if the theories of *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) emerge after Lipps’ *Aesthetics*, Kandinsky’s “first abstract watercolour” was painted about 1908, preceded by a rich series of works where the dedicated study of both expressive and dynamic qualities is more than evident. The same is true of other work done within the *avant-garde* art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in Munich, where Kandinsky, with Franz Marc, Paul Jawlensky and others founded, as is well known, the *Blaue Reiter* movement (1911-14).

**7. Abstract  
Visual Art and  
Experimental  
Phenomenology**

Instituting a pictorial space means literally “abstracting” these pervasive yet silent qualities from our concrete surrounding world in order to display them before our eyes, as objects whose variations and possibilities offer us a new, infinite domain of exploration<sup>12</sup>. This is, after all, what painters have always done. The frame of a painting manifests the initial “bracketing” the painter performs with respect to all the non-aesthetic goals of ordinary perception. It separates pictorial space from one’s surrounding actual space.

Yet it is only around the birth of “modern” art that this “bracketing” and this “abstraction”, achieved with the aid of aesthetic objects and their means (scores and melodies<sup>13</sup>, paper and drawings, collages, etc.), entered the laboratories of science and gave rise to experimental phenomenology<sup>14</sup>, including, very early on, Gestalt psychology.

What grounds abstract painting is indeed the very same discovery with which Gestalt psychology began. Both recognize that perceptual contents, far from being the unorganized “multiplicity” or “chaos” (Kant) of sense data postulated by the empiricist tradition, are organized by “configural” or structural properties. These properties are given, not “constructed”, and are non-conceptual, pre-linguistic, and often multi-modal or amodal in nature.

The fact that the two groups of researchers share a common root is something no author could better bear witness to than Rudolf Arnheim, the brightest pupil of Max Wertheimer. Arnheim was a brilliant young art critic in the roaring 1920s in Berlin, the director of the Italian Istituto del Cinema in the 1930s, and the founder of the psychology of visual art in his post-exile American academic life<sup>15</sup>. I quote him at length below not only because he and others of his school gave us a language for describing the axiological contents of aesthetical values, but also because there are passages in his work that bring the common root of Gestalt Psychology and abstract painting to the foreground. Take, for instance, this powerful synthesis of the “Kandinskian” analysis of dynamic qualities we’ve just reconstructed:

Visual experience is dynamic. This theme will recur throughout the present book. What a person or animal perceives is not only an arrangement of objects, of colors and shapes, of movements and sizes. It is, perhaps first of all, an interplay of directed tensions. These tensions are not something the observer adds, for reasons of his own, to static images. Rather, these tensions are as inherent in any percept as size, shape, location, or color. Because they have magnitude and direction, these tensions can be described as psychological ‘forces.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This point of course generalizes across the visual arts, and, *mutatis mutandis*, the institution of other aesthetical spaces, like that of music.

<sup>13</sup> As is well known, the notion of “Gestalt” had been introduced into psychology by Christian von Ehrenfels in 1890 in his essay “On Gestalt qualities”, where, observing that humans can recognize two melodies as identical even when no two corresponding notes in them have the same frequency, he argued that these forms must possess a “Gestalt quality”—a characteristic that is immediately given, over and above the single tones. Cf. von Ehrenfels C., *Über Gestaltqualitäten*. (1890), *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*. 1890;14:224–292. (Translated as “On Gestalt qualities”). In B. Smith (Ed. & Trans.), (1988), *Foundations of Gestalt Theory* (pp. 82–117). Munich, Germany/ Vienna, Austria: Philosophia Verlag.)

<sup>14</sup> I use this expression, “experimental phenomenology,” to refer to that part of early experimental psychology that harboured and outlasted classical Gestalt psychology, on the one hand, and that instigated the powerful approach to generalization which led Husserl to the study of the eidetic universe. See De Monticelli (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Rudolph Arnheim’s life (1904, Berlin – 2007, Ann Arbor, USA) actually spans the great temporal distance between the time of Stumpf, Husserl and Wertheimer and our own. See Arnheim (1954, 1974). The 1974 edition is a revised version of the original, published after 20 years of teaching in several New York Universities and Harvard University.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

Perhaps no image could better illustrate the concept of visual force or tension at the heart of Kandinsky's theory of elements (especially as it concerns point and plane) than the one reproduced in Figure 5. It exemplifies one of the phenomena to which Arnheim devoted most of his research, namely, the "power of centre."

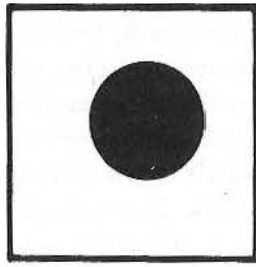


Figure 5. The Power of the centre

This figure – which is the first presented in his main work, occurring in the section titled "Balance"<sup>17</sup> – illustrates the first principle of Gestalt theory. The fact that we perceive the slightly off-centre position of the "point" on the square plane is evidence for the principle that we grasp organized wholes. What we experience in perception is not the association of atomic perceptual data, but the immediate givenness of the elements appearing from the start as a function of the wholes to which they belong.

Wagemans and colleagues put the point thus: "The contents of our awareness are by and large not additive but possess a characteristic coherence"<sup>18</sup>. There are several additional principles further articulating this notion of coherence that are also illustrated by this simple figure. Firstly, there is the principle of figure/ground, according to which the partial contents we perceive are experienced as segregated from a background. Secondly, there is the principle of unity, the basic organizing factor discussed by Kandinsky, which highlights structural features such as the square basic plane with its horizontal and vertical boundaries, its center, and its diagonals. Here the invisible center is manifested by the off-center point, and induces a dynamic quality within the figure, giving the impression of things being imbalanced. I defer again to the expertise of Arnheim:

The disk in Figure 5 is not simply displaced with regard to the center of the square. There is something restless about it. It looks as though it had been at the center and wished to return, or as though it wants to move away even farther. And the disk's relations to the edges of the square are a similar play of attraction and repulsion<sup>19</sup>.

The "power of the center" in a sense "requires" the disk to be centred, that is, for the simple composition to reach *balance*. This is the first mention I've made so far of that feature of the perceived world that Wolfgang Koehler called "requiredness", a type of "oughtness" which turns out to pervade the life world and also indicates for us the "place" that values have in it. This simple example shows that it is not really a "subjective" – or rather, arbitrary – matter

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Wagemans and colleagues, 2012: 1172–1217. Published online 2012 Jul 30. doi: 10.1037/a0029333, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3482144/>

<sup>19</sup> Arnheim (1974), p. 12.

to perceive what is required in a given context. Requiredness is not reducible to the allegedly prescriptive component of a thick value term (like *imbalanced* or *disharmonious*). There is of course nobody “requiring” the disk to be centred, any more than there is always someone commanding a warrior to be courageous or commanding someone giving an argument to ensure its validity. Nor are such thick value terms necessarily action guiding. They have plenty of descriptive content. But this content consists in qualities of requirednesses or – as it is referred to in experimental phenomenology – of “qualities of demand” (Albertazzi 2013). We literally perceive the demands that things manifest.

Similarly, the apparent ascending movement we perceive in Kandinsky’s rising points in Figure 3 is also not “merely subjective”. If it is an illusion, it is not correctable, much like those so called “illusions” (such as the Muller-Lyer) that once led Gestalt psychologists to radically question the causal-physicalistic model of perception. The lightness of the “ascending points” is a material value quality, the global quality of a well-organized whole.

**8. Conclusion** Moore’s greatest intuition – that ideality is irreducible to reality – is tangled up with his worst mistake, which was to hold that Goodness or the Good is “a simple, non-analysable object of thought”<sup>20</sup>. Against Moore, we ought to hold instead that “Goodness” is a proxy word for “any positive value quality”. That is, it functions as a variable ranging over thick or material values. As an attributive adjective applicable to exemplars of various kinds of things (e.g., as with the phrase “a good knife”) it is a variable ranging over the positive value qualities of ideal exemplars of the relevant kind (e.g., functional value qualities, in the case of this domestic tool). As a moral predicate (“morally good”) it is a thick, –not thin, concept, ranging over all moral virtues and qualities of an intention, action, or person enabling them to realize the best value(s) possible in a given situation, which presupposes that we are capable of perceiving what is required in the first place, in short, that we are capable of *attention*.

The upshot of this analysis is that, more generally, thin values depend on thick values, and it is false that thick values have no descriptive *value* content, i.e., that value qualities cannot be analysed, explained or described. They can, but only in terms of other values, contrary to Moore’s ineffability thesis.

Hare and Williams make the complementary mistake of reducing thick value terms to their alleged “real-descriptive” content plus a universal or indeterminate commendatory force.

The No-Matter-of-Value thesis makes material axiology inconceivable.

But I hope to have shown not only that counterexamples to that thesis are *conceivable*, but also that we can *see and feel* what we conceive in them, thus making it possible for us to describe them more or less adequately and supply Material Axiology with its grounding evidence.

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<sup>20</sup> Moore (1903, 1959), §15, p.21

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