

Abstract: DISCOGNITION

At the same time that "affect theory" has become popular in the humanities, the philosophy of mind and its allied scientific fields -- cognitive psychology and neurobiology -- have been developing a far different account of affect, or of what they more commonly term "emotion." Cognitivist approaches to the mind used to ignore or deprecate the emotions altogether. But in the last decade or two, these approaches have instead sought to provide a utilitarian, functionalist, and adaptationist account of emotional states. Thomas Metzinger, for instance, argues that emotions "possess a normative character; they represent the biological or social value of a certain state of affairs to the organism as a whole... This feature distinguishes them from all other conscious representata -- although interestingly, the phenomenology of emotions tells us that they can endow perceptual and cognitive states with a certain 'affective tone'."

I would like to unpack this assertion, because it contains some interestingly ambiguous resonances, ones that were not necessarily intended by Metzinger. He largely sees emotional responses as fallible -- but nonetheless often useful -- aids to cognition, because they provide rough-and-ready evaluations of the ways in which circumstances in the world might help or hinder the biological and corporeal needs of the organism. Yet at the same time, he recognizes certain exceptions to this principle. For one thing, Metzinger's claim that emotions have "developed from an evolutionary optimization process" leaves open the question of the non-adaptive consequences of evolution (such as Lewontin and Gould's "spandrels"). For another, Metzinger notes that his functionalist and adaptationist description of the emotions does not account for the phenomenon of "affective tone." Indeed, "affective tone" can be aligned with many other aspects of mental functioning which are not reducible to cognitive ends. Metzinger's largely cognitivist account of mental process and phenomenal consciousness is nonetheless filled with discussions, not only of bizarre psychological dysfunctions that demonstrate the limits of cognition, but also of the "beauty" of phenomenal states -- such as "Raffman qualia," "Lewis qualia," "Metzinger qualia," that are "so subtle, so volatile as it were, that [they evade] cognitive access in principle." And Metzinger also writes about phenomena of "intensity" and of "structureless density," which push against the limits of conceptual categorization. Even the most hard-core cognitivist accounts of mind, like Metzinger's, are thus compelled to acknowledge the *supplemental* presence of "nonconceptual content."

I would like to expand upon these hints in order to provide a noncognitive, and fundamentally affective, account of sentience. Cognitivist and representationalist theories of mind are confronted with elements that they can neither subsume nor exclude, but can only regard as supplemental. I suggest that these supplemental elements are in fact the primordial forms of sentience, and that they are preconditions for -- without being thereby reducible to -- any sort of cognition or representation whatsoever. Organisms are affective before they are cognitive, because they are systems for accumulating and dissipating energy, before they are systems for processing information. Where cognitive science and philosophy of mind have tended to assume that affect serves cognition, we should rather see cognition as a belated and occasional consequence of a more basic affectivity. There are important philosophical precedents for this line of argument. For Kant, aesthetic judgments arise from singular intuitions for which there is no adequate concept. For Whitehead, primordial "feeling" takes the form of "a 'valuation up' or a 'valuation down'" that precedes, and determines, any sort of cognition or conceptualization. For Wittgenstein, while inner sensation "is not a *something*," it is also "not a *nothing* either." All these approaches point to a primordial form of sentience that is nonintentional, noncorrelational, and anoetic; and that is best described, in a positive sense, as autistic, affective, and aesthetic.