Varieties of Rightness Experience
How Cognitive Functions Express a Personal Fringe

Georges Potworowski & Michel Ferrari
Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, 9th floor
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6
CANADA

gpotworowski@oise.utoronto.ca
mferrari@oise.utoronto.ca

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ABSTRACT: In *Sensation's Ghost,* Mangan (2001) elaborates on James's notion of fringe. We agree with Mangan that "the most important nonsensory experience is coherence or 'rightness'". Our critique presses for a fuller analysis of what Mangan calls feelings of rightness and wrongness (hereafter FOR/W). We first describe different types and levels of FOR/W and how types and levels interact. We also discuss sensitivity to and intensity of FOR/W, which vary systematically, and explain some of this systematicity. Finally, our elaboration of FOR/W helps explain the personal significance of non-sensory or fringe experience -- something critical for James, especially in his later writings.

1. Introduction

In *Sensation's Ghost,* Mangan (2001) provides an overview of James's notion of fringe as expressed in the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), an important and largely neglected aspect of conscious experience. We agree with Mangan that "the most important nonsensory experience is coherence or 'rightness'" (2001). Our main interest in this

critique lies in pressing for a fuller analysis of what Mangan calls feelings of rightness and wrongness (FOR/W). Our first task is to describe types and levels of FOR/W. A related interest lies in describing the dynamics of FOR/W in terms of how types and levels interact. Also, we believe that both sensitivity to and intensity of FOR/W vary systematically. Our second task, then, is to offer some general principles that can explain at least some of that systematicity. Our third interest is to show how our elaboration of FOR/W helps explain the significance of non-sensory or fringe experience for James, especially in his later writings (James, 1902, 1909, 1910, 1911). To this end, we try to spell out this significance whenever the opportunity arises.

We begin with Mangan's characterization of feeling of rightness (FOR): "Rightness is at once the core feeling of positive evaluation, of coherence, of meaningfulness, of knowledge" (2001, p. 4). Although this is a good starting point, we believe that FOR/W vary qualitatively, and on this basis can be divided into types.

2. Types of FOR/W

Mangan seems to have at least an implicit notion of types of FOR/W when he writes "rightness and wrongness operate in virtually all cognitive domains," although exactly what he counts as a cognitive domain remains unclear. Still, he mentions FOR/W in such varying contexts as aesthetic experience, mystical experience, and problem solving, as well as in Capgras syndrome and OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder). This suggests Mangan is aware that there are qualitative differences between particular FOR/W, but not necessarily aware of what they are. How and why FOR/W are different, and how and why they interact all seem germane to his argument, and so it is surprising that he makes no attempt to identify those differences or offer any account of their interaction. Perhaps he thinks the undertaking is too difficult, or just beyond the scope of his thesis. What we offer, then, is less a criticism and more an extension and fleshing out of FOR/W, which ultimately improves the explanation of the phenomenon, and also helps explain its significance for James.

There are at least two phenomenologically distinct FOR/W that we will call types-conceptual and value. There may be more types, and at least value FOR/W is further divisible into subtypes (e.g., moral and aesthetic). Still, our purpose is not to elaborate an exhaustive taxonomy of FOR/W types, but rather to get an initial sense of the principles according to which conceptual and value FOR/W differ and interact. To this end, we briefly examine each type in terms of its context, nature, and cognitive function.

One of the overarching functions of cognition is to systematize intelligible patterns in the data or stimuli it receives or generates (to what extent the pattern is *in* the data is not our concern here). Part of that systematization involves the conscious evaluation of potential patterns, where such an evaluation can be thought of as determining whether a specific object *fits* a specific context. In this process, FOR/W are the indicators, since every FOR/W is invariably a reaction to whether a specific object fits a specific context: feeling

of rightness (FOR) indicates context fit, while feeling of wrongness (FOW) indicates context misfit. In the next sections we will go beyond the phenomenological distinctness of conceptual and value FOR/W to distinguish conceptual from value FOR/W both by the kind of (mis)fit each is a reaction to (i.e., their context) and by the principles of (mis)fit each follows (i.e., their nature).We will also suggest that each type of FOR/W also seems to fill a specific cognitive function; that is, each seems to play a specific role in well-functioning cognition.

2.1. Conceptual FOR/W

The conceptual FOR/W is a reaction to the (mis)fit of a concept. Without entering the age-old discussion among philosophers and psychologists about what exactly a concept is, we will offer a definition which is sufficient for our purposes. A concept is, in its simplest form, a generalization of irreducible and self-presenting sensory (e.g., red) or non-sensory (e.g., fringe) experiences. One of the key properties of the concept is compositionality: concepts combine to form new concepts. A more complex concept, then, is a generalization, tacit or explicit, of a particular pattern of simpler concepts. The form of a complex concept is either the prototype, a definition (e.g., a bachelor is a never married man), or family resemblances. The nature of a complex concept is correspondence (e.g., the FOW that comes with "John is not a bachelor"), the concept's own internal logical coherence (e.g., the FOW that is invoked by "a married bachelor"), and the concept's consistency with the individual's other accepted concepts, frameworks, and world view. These three are the only principles by which we (can) judge concepts, implicitly or explicitly, and so the only causes of conceptual FOR/W. However, FOR/W are always limited by the individual's perceptions, her understanding of the relevant context, her ability to judge a concept's logical coherence and a concept's coherence with accepted concepts. Most of Mangan's discussion concerns conceptual FOR/W, but there is another type of FOR/W that is crucial to understanding James' (1890, 1909) notion of fringe.

2.2. Value FOR/W

Value is a second type of FOR/W. Value is meant here in the widest possible psychological sense of felt importance or meaningfulness. Broadly speaking, we value something if it is alive to us, energizes us, interests us, and/or moves us (James, 1909, 1911). We hold, following James, that when one values something one feels (not merely, or even necessarily thinks) that one values it. This non-sensory feeling that indicates valuing we call *affective resonance,* and affective resonance serves an important cognitive function.

Unlike concepts, which allow us to understand, values, through affective resonance, impel us to action. That is, they provide a guiding force in our decisions (or judgments)

about everything from our own self-preservation, to the television shows we watch, to the moral rules we follow. Although values are inherently fuzzy entities, humankind has a history of trying to articulate them in propositional form in order that they may be codified, transmitted, and shared. The most ubiquitous example might well be moral rules, like the commandment "thou shalt not kill": clearly the proposition, or the letter of the law, imperfectly captures the value, or the spirit of the law, and it is to the spirit (i.e., its affective resonance) that we turn when interpretation is required -- for instance, can we kill in self-defense? That the value is not captured by its propositional instantiation becomes even clearer when we consider that it is one thing to conceptually grasp "thou shalt not kill," another to believe it without a sense of affective resonance, and yet another to feel it resonate strongly within us, as it might in a pacifist (James, 1911).

Ultimately, value helps us select objects that improve psychological fitness (survival) in a particular environment, just as conceptual understanding improves fitness by allowing reliable prediction. Within the broad parameters of all possible fitness improving choices, there are many possible and (mostly) coherent combinations -- each with its own set of resonances or *affective fringe.* This affective fringe, which is defined by a set of values, plays a central part in our sense of identity, a point that was particularly important for James throughout his career (James, 1897,1902, 1907, 1909, 1910, 1911). This does not mean, however, that all fringes are equally possible, likely, or effective. For example, a general condition for a set of values to resonate is that it not trigger any major conceptual FOWs. That is, it would be considered highly unreasonable, if not pathological, to adopt a set of values that one realizes seriously violates conceptual principles (e.g., has contradictions). This is in line with James' (1902, 1907) pragmatism, whose principle of truth is the provision of vital benefits, or the satisfaction of personal needs and interests. For this reason, sets of values still vary across subjects, lifespans, and cultures. Furthermore, whereas some values are relatively fixed, some say innate, others are transient, and others still may fluctuate in their intensity. In more extreme cases, entire sets of values can undergo sudden and radical change, as in a conversion experience (James, 1902)

The principle that defines the nature of the value FOR/W is elicitation of affective resonance. In other words, if there is resonance, then there is value (where this value resides is a philosophical question we will not address). Because values are fuzzy and vary in the degree to which we are explicitly conscious of them, we often get value FOR/W without (immediately) being able to understand or articulate why. Despite occasional fuzziness about the perceived value that elicited the FOR/W, the valence of the affective resonance, whether positive, negative, mixed, or zero, is usually clear. Positive resonance, or value FOR, indicates that a perceived entity (complex concept, event, item, etc.) fits in a value context -- it is felt to be in accord with a value. A negative resonance, or a value FOW, indicates a misfit or disaccord. The experience of mixed resonance indicates that values with different valences are at play, which (analogous to mixed emotions) are often conflicting. (Consider the FOR a parent might feel because her son stood up for a weaker student facing a bully at school, mixed with a FOW because he did so violently.) Finally, no perceivable resonance (zero valence) indicates indifference, or a context where little or no value is perceived. While it is important to note that

positive and negative resonances do not simply cancel each other out, a discussion of the dynamics of competing values and the effect of this competition on affective resonance is beyond the scope of this paper. We turn now to the interaction between conceptual and value FOR/Ws.

3. Interaction Between Conceptual and Value FOR/Ws

There are two senses in which conceptual and value FOR/Ws interact: First, in terms of the general relationship between concepts and value (i.e., how one affects the other and how the two combine psychologically). The second way is in complex acts.<1>

3.1. The Building of Frameworks and Their Function

In our discussion of value FOR/W, we explained that a complex concept can either elicit a FOR and be valued, elicit a FOW and be rejected, elicit both, or elicit no (significant) resonance. There is more, however, to the relationship between the conceptual and value domains. First, when a complex concept or group of such concepts is such that it has sufficient explanatory power -- and it is valued for this reason -- it takes on the status of a conceptual framework. One distinguishing characteristic of a framework is that it acts as filter in the process of subsequent conceptual evaluation and thereby defines the particulars of the third principle of conceptual FOR/W -- correspondence with existing frameworks or worldview. In order to make sense of the world, one adopts several conceptual frameworks, each dealing with a different conceptual domain (e.g., one for spirituality, another for science). The most powerful framework, however, is one that attempts to integrate other frameworks with one's set of values, however imperfectly. This *meta*-framework is referred to commonly as a worldview, or what James (1902) calls overbeliefs. The influence of one's overbeliefs is significant, for just as one's conceptual frameworks affect conceptual evaluation, one's overbeliefs affects framework evaluation. In this way, a theory or framework that is understood, but does not resonate, will ultimately be rejected (James, 1897, 1911).

This was shown in the study of high school students in the Southern United States, most from strongly Christian Fundamentalist families, who understood Darwin's theory of evolution perfectly well (and so had conceptual FOR/W about exam answers they generated), but who simply did not value or believe the theory to be true (i.e., it did not resonate as a value FOR) (Jackson, Doster, Meadows, & Wood, 1995). Likewise, for Taylor (1989, 1995), second-order emotions<2> involve a FOR/W elicited by the correspondence between one's standard of how one ought to feel (what kind of resonance one ought to have) and how one does feel (on one's actual resonance). In this case the (mis)match is between the value (or overbelief) one wants to have, and the one we actually have. The extent of the match between the two reflects one's degree of felt authenticity. For instance, for Taylor (1989, 1994) one might feel ashamed when one has

a FOW about being angry, but feel pride when anger is accompanied by a FOR (e.g., in righteous anger). In addition to FOR/W interacting within types and across types, FOR/W constantly interact across levels.

3.2. Interaction of Levels of FOR/W in Complex Acts

The second component of FOR/W is its level. Mangan (2001) successfully elicits in the reader FOW and then FOR in the kite flying paragraph. In his subsequent analysis of the phenomenology of the elicited FOR/W, he explicitly mentions the levels at which the reader made sense of the paragraph, and isolates the level at which there was a FOW. Unfortunately, he fails to explicitly state and elaborate on the *levels* of FOR/W. The kite-flying paragraph offers an excellent example of the different levels of successful processing -- lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic -- necessary for a complex task like reading to be possible and successful. Exactly how these levels build up and the details of how successful processing at lower levels affects processing at higher levels (and vice versa) are central to the literature on, among other things, (reading) expertise (Wagner & Stanovich, 1996). Like reading, many if not most of the things we do involve complex acts whose success depends on coordinating, through regulation, the many component successes (and hence FOR/W) at several levels of activity.

Having distinguished types of FOR/W, and two senses in which they interact, we can go beyond Mangan's claim that non-sensory experiences can co-occur (as in déjà vu) and fail to occur (as in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Capgras syndrome). In Mangan's account of Capgras, everything seems correct perceptually yet there is a sense that things are somehow wrong. Although he does not elaborate on the FOW involved, it is clear that context fit is being violated. If we consider *friend recognition* as a complex act, then the meta-level context fit "I recognize this friend" requires getting (most of) the component set of FORs (visual, auditory, etc.). Usually, if any component triggers a FOW, then we can identify it (e.g., she looks, sounds, and walks like my girlfriend, but does not dress like her). We then try to account for the component FOW (e.g., she has changed her style). In Capgras, however, there is a meta-level FOW, but no component FOW. One possible explanation of what happens is that the meta-level FOR that is expected is not triggered. Consequently, a meta-level FOW is triggered, though not by a component FOW (normal contextual mis-fit), but rather by the missing meta-level FOR. This would explain the inability of the individual to explain what (component) is wrong, for the only thing wrong is that she is not getting the meta-level FOR she expects. Why expectation makes a difference in our example becomes clearer when the sensitivity to FOR/W is explained.

4. Sensitivity to FOR/W

With the notable exception of his account of Capgras, Mangan purposefully ignores FOW "as much as possible in order to reduce verbiage and innumerable side issues." He considers FOW as the opposite of FOR -- its flipside. In our account of Capgras, however, we saw that the FOR-FOW relationship is not always so simple. The quality of the difference between them becomes clearer when we consider our varying sensitivity to each. What, we can ask, determines when we are sensitive to FOR and FOW? Mangan does not explore this question explicitly, but does make comments that relate to it. For one, he states that when there is successful context fit one would expect that one would "enjoy an *experience* of coherence." Here he criticizes Whittlesea and Williams (2000), who hold that when processing is *completely* coherent, there is no FOR experience. Mangan also disagrees with their idea that a feeling of familiarity underlies the whole process of coherence evaluation. Although we agree with Mangan insofar as it is FOR and not a feeling of familiarity that is performing the evaluative function, we disagree with his implied claim that we necessarily experience "coherence" (FOR) when processing is coherent. We also reject Whittlesea and Williams' (2000) account, which, although partly accurate, is missing too much. Their account is accurate insofar as it captures the context-fit component of our model for the dynamic of FOR/W intensity (see below). However, it says nothing of the important role of salience, that is, of what is important given the values at play. And while it offers some conditions for FOW, it offers none for FOR.

We propose that sensitivity to FOR and FOW is a function of purpose, automaticity, and context fit. A particular purpose is driven by a number of (often imperfectly) coordinated values, and purpose affects salience. Salience affects what will likely attract our attention (i.e. what we will be sensitive to). Two examples of different purposes will show that sensitivity to FOR and FOW are distinct, though not mutually exclusive. In the early stages of *building* up an immature hypothesis, one often explicitly seeks supporting evidence to determine whether there is enough of it to justify pursuing the hypothesis. During this phase one tends to be more sensitive to FORs than FOWs. In other words, when one's purpose is to *find* or *establish* context fit one is more sensitive to the FORs that indicate fit. Once a hypothesis shows sufficient promise, one can enter a stage characterized by double-checking context fits, and trying to find weaknesses of, exceptions to, and limits of the hypothesis. Given one's changed purpose during this *testing* phase, one becomes more sensitive to the FOWs that indicate context misfit. Our capacity to be distinctly sensitive to both FOR and FOW makes even more sense when we consider that a given complex situation usually requires us to coordinate simultaneous, though distinct purposes across both levels and types. In the end, varying purposes and degrees of attention across levels and types have a quantitative effect on how sensitive we are to particular context (mis)fits.

A second factor affecting sensitivity to FOR/W is automaticity. Mangan mentions the effect of automaticity, which he refers to as habituation. Citing Baars (1989), he claims that with habituation content leaves consciousness and is handled by more efficient non-conscious processes. It seems clear that complex acts are only manageable in terms of their attentional demands because many of the component acts are relatively automatic. We usually invest most of our attention on the non-automatic component acts. Reading is

a perfect example: the level of decoding the novice tends to focus on (e.g., the lexical) is quite automatic in the expert reader. The upshot with automatic acts is that a noticeable FOR is not triggered by every component success because one is expecting success, and so is not expending a significant amount of precious monitoring capacity at that level. In fact, FORs for all component acts would serve more to distract than help. One does, however, remain somewhat sensitive to FOW in automatic acts because failure, if ignored, would compromise the success of the complex act. This may explain rather than contradict Mangan's idea, as the continued sensitivity to FOW may be an unconscious monitoring. In the end, however, the effects of purpose and automaticity on sensitivity to FOR/W suggest that success does not necessarily trigger FOR.

The third factor affecting sensitivity to FOR/W is context fit. It seems the continuing sensitivity to FOW is not isolated to automatic acts. Many times during the day we are distracted by something novel, though clearly not every novelty distracts us. The novel, or unfamiliar, that does attract one's attention does so because it is a significant enough context mis-fit. Consequently, the immediate reaction to such a novel situation is FOW. The reason that our attention is grabbed by a novel enough situation, despite the purposes that focus our attention, is, quite simply, self-preservation. Sensitivity to novel context mis-fit translates directly into sensitivity to potential danger. This leads us to our next topic: intensity of FOR/W.

5. Intensity of FOR/W

Intensity is related to sensitivity to FOR/W. Although Mangan discusses the intensity of FOR/W at several points, he does so in rough and scattered detail. He states, and we agree, that typically FOR/W (and non-sensory experience in general) is less intense than sensory experience. He adds that under certain circumstances FOR can be intense, explaining in one place that the intensity of a FOR "indicates" the degree of context fit, and in another that it "represents" degree of salience. Again, we agree. However, he never explicitly states a trend, nor makes any mention of the relationship between context fit and salience we described in the previous section. We propose that salience and context fit both affect the intensity of FOR/W, but do so differently. The degree of salience is proportional to the intensity of both FOR and FOW. The degree of expected context fit is proportional to the intensity of FOR, whereas the degree of expected context misfit is proportional to that of FOW. The trend, then, is straightforward, if not intuitive.

6. Personal Meaning and FOR/W

All of these extensions of fringe were important to James, especially in his later discussion of fringe experience. Although Mangan seems surprised that "James [in *Principles of Psychology,* 1890] put the bulk of his treatment of non-sensory experience

under a heading that reads *'Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous,'* by looking at how James makes use of fringe in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) we can see the profound personal significance fringe experiences had for James -- over and above their function of extending cognitive function. Specifically, in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), James explains in what sense the fringe is crucial to a full personal experience of consciousness.

> My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into an subconscious more. [...] The centre works in one way while the margins work in another, and presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze. The collective and distributive ways of being coexist here, for each part functions distinctly, making connections with its own peculiar region in the still wider rest of experience and tends to draw us into that line, and yet the whole is somehow felt as one pulse of our life -- not conceived so, but felt so. (James, 1909, 288-289)

For James, fringe was tied into our deepest feelings of rightness about ourselves and our place in the world at its most fundamental level -- including the deepest relation of self to what is hidden -- minimally a Freudian subliminal self (James, 1902, 1911), but possibly an external God (James, 1902, 1909, 1910). This fact explains the importance James attached to conversion experiences that recenter personal selves and consequently their fringe (James, 1902, 1911). In any case, the fringe is a gateway into a personal sense of 'more' than our waking selves. In fact, how conversion recenters the self and its fringe at different points in our lives suggests, for James (1909), that we may participate in a higher, more inclusive consciousness of which we are typically blind -- although the exact sense of what he meant by this remains obscure.

> Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibilities not yet in our present sight. And just as we are co-conscious with our own momentary margin, may not we ourselves form the margin of some more really central self in things which is co-conscious with the whole of us? May not you and I be confluent in a higher consciousness, and confluently active there, tho we now know it not? (James, 1909, 289-290)

We are not advocating that contemporary readers adopt James' view of the metaphysical implications of fringe experiences. However, we do believe that Mangan might more fully emphasize the personal significance of fringe experiences of value FOR/W in centering and recentering our very deep sense of our identity, without which we would surely experience a sort of Capgas effect about our very selves.

Notes

<1>. By a complex act we mean an act composed of other acts, where each component act has its own FOR/W and the complex act has its meta-level FOR/W. This construction has both a vertical (serial) and horizontal (parallel) dimension that can consist of several orders of magnitude, depending on the complexity of the overall act.

<2>. Second-order emotions are not to be confused with mixed emotions, but in both cases conceptual clarification often helps in the mediation between conflicting emotions. An example of conceptual mediation between conflicting values is delayed gratification.

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