WHAT'S TO FEAR IN LOSING A SENSE?

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Abstract

Many people fear losing one or more of their senses, and most fear losing some more than others. However, if a disability such as being without the use of a sense does not in the long run make a person worse off, then such fears may not seem reasonable, warranted, or apt. This paper argues that our senses are distinctive sources of value. In particular, our senses play an underappreciated axiological role. They figure deeply in our cares, concerns, and projects, and they are sources of final or non-instrumental value. Moreover, different senses comprise distinct collections of perceptual capacities that contribute in distinctive ways to a person's cares, concerns, and projects. Therefore, from one's present evaluative perspective, it makes sense to fear the loss of such a distinctive source of value, and it makes sense to fear the loss of some senses more than others, even if, after adapting, the loss of a sense does not impact one's overall, long-term well-being.

Keywords

sense perception; value; fear; disability; transformative experience

Fearing the loss of a sense

Here are two observations. First, many people fear losing one or more of their senses. It is daunting to imagine losing one's ability to see, hear, touch, taste, or smell, whether due to accident, disease, or aging. The threat need not be acute, but considering the prospect invites one to anticipate a future harm.[^1] Second, the fear is not equal for each sense. Most people fear losing some senses more than others. For example, most people say vision matters more than smell [@Dempsey-Jones:2019; @Herz:2022]. In each case, the fear seems to make sense. It seems reasonable, warranted, or apt to fear the loss of a sense. And, if some senses are more important than others, unequal fear is reasonable, warranted, or apt.

[^1]: Thus, fear of losing a sense passes Bordini and Toronto's [-@Bordini:2022] test for genuine fear because it has the characteristic intentional object (a threat) and formal object (harmfulness). On the

other hand, ‘I am afraid that I will not make it for dinner’, reports uncertainty or worry about the future, but no threat or harm. ‘I am afraid I will become blind’, also has a similar reading, in which it does not express genuine fear, as when reporting a doctor’s diagnosis. But this contrasts with the genuine fear of losing a sense. Nonetheless, if one substitutes an alternative aversive or negative evaluative attitude that does not attribute threat, danger, or harmfulness to the prospect of losing a sense, it parallels the main substance of this paper.

These observations raise two corresponding questions. The first question is: Why fear losing a sense modality at all? There are descriptive and normative versions of this question. Why do we fear losing a sense—that is, what explains or accounts for it? And what, if anything, makes it reasonable, warranted, or apt to fear losing a sense? The second question is: Why fear losing some sense modalities more than others? There are descriptive and normative versions of this question, too. Why do we fear losing some senses more than others? And what, if anything, makes this reasonable, warranted, or apt.

The fear is recalcitrant

Start with the first question. A natural answer is that we fear the loss of a sense because it is a cost that makes a person worse off. Losing a sense impacts well-being. The fear responds to the apparent threat of harm.

This answer faces a few complications. First, @Barnes:2016 makes a strong case that a physical disability, such as being without a sense, does not inherently make someone worse off. Other factors, such as an inhospitable environment or culture, chronic suffering, or lack of opportunity, account for any impact to overall well-being. Second, by their own testimony, many people who do not have the use of a sense do not take themselves to be worse off due to their disability. Most people born without a sense do not regret it or wish they had the use of that sense. This is common in Deaf communities [@Ringo:2013]. It is not that losing a sense is just like being born without it. But simply being without a sense does not itself account for the fear of losing it. Whatever one fears is not something missed by those who lack it from birth.[^2] Third, losing a sense tends not to impact people as they imagine. After adjusting, most people seem to be just as happy, satisfied, and generally well-off, by a range of empirical measures. [^3] If so, losing a sense is not as bad as people think. The fear seems out of proportion.

[^2]: So, more specifically, the first question is: Why fear losing or thereafter missing a sense? It is not simply a question of why to fear undergoing the loss of a sense, or of why to fear being without a sense. Similarly for the second question about unequal fear. To

simplify, while not conflating being without a sense from birth and being without a sense due to loss, fear of losing a sense in this paper encompasses fear of losing or thereafter missing a sense. Each of the latter raises distinct considerations addressed in later sections.

[^3]: *The disability paradox* [@Albrecht.Devlieger:1999] is the apparent conflict between *the standard view* [@Amundson:2005] that disability negatively impacts quality of life (QoL) with extensive empirical evidence that most disabled people report good or excellent quality of life [see also @Campbell.Stramondo:2017; Reynolds:2024]. For example, @Binkley.etal:2022 say:

> Tellingly, in a recent survey of practicing physicians in the United States, 82.4% of 714 physicians indicated their belief that people with significant disability (as defined by the study) have worse QoL than people without disabilities. Yet this judgment directly conflicts with a large body of social science research spanning decades suggesting that people with significant disability, like those with less severe disability, experience QoL that is similar to that of people without disabilities. [1326]

Describing a case concerning vision loss, @Binkley.etal:2022 say doctors' beliefs about poor patient QoL after surgery for aggressive but resectable skull-based tumors makes them reluctant to operate because the surgery leads to blindness.

> The belief that extensive craniofacial resections resulting in binocular or monocular vision loss should be avoided is not purely a consequence of concerns about resectability or oncologic prognosis. It derives from the assumption that when patients become functionally monocular or blind, their QoL will decrease. But a large body of social science research on the relationship between disability and QoL refutes this assumption. [1327]

Vision loss, however, is linked to increased rates of depression and anxiety, from roughly 5% each globally to roughly 10% each with vision loss. Nevertheless, the vast majority of people with vision loss do not experience depression or anxiety. And, surprisingly, there is no link between severity of vision loss and depression or anxiety. Most researchers trace the increase to other factors, such as poor overall health, denial versus acceptance, stigma, discrimination, and isolation. See, for example, @Rees.etal:2010, @Aa.etal:2015, @Nollett.etal:2019, @Brunes.Heir:2020, and @Boagey.etal:2022.

This leads to a third observation. The fear of losing a sense is

recalcitrant. Even after learning it is unlikely to make you significantly worse off, the fear sticks around. Appreciating the evidence does little to extinguish it. Can we reconcile the idea that losing a sense may not leave one much worse off with the idea that the fear is reasonable, warranted, or apt, while nevertheless recalcitrant?

The fear is not wholly irrational

Perhaps one fears life in a culture that makes things difficult for those with disabilities. Undoubtedly, facing discrimination, fewer opportunities, and extra obstacles all warrant fear. However, imagine a culture that is abundant, equitable, inclusive, and accommodating for those with disabilities. Even with this stipulation, many people still fear the loss of a sense and fear losing some senses more than others. Thus, there is more to the fear of losing a sense, which persists even if one accounts for the fear of an inhospitable culture.

Even though it is recalcitrant to undermining considerations, the remaining fear of losing a sense is not wholly irrational or unreasonable. It does not come from thin air. It does not appear to be grounded in no good reason. For instance, it could involve loss aversion, transition costs, or missing out on something of value.

However, the fear of losing a sense is not just a case of simple loss aversion. We do not like to lose things we have—in this respect, mere possession matters. But senses are not like useless trinkets that we prefer just because we possess. Our senses are useful to us. We do not value them merely due to possessing them. We value our senses for what they do for us and what they offer.

Moreover, the fear does not just stem from mere transition costs. By this I mean that the value a sense offers typically is not readily replaceable—one cannot gain easy access to just the same value by other means. The value of vision is not readily replaced by hearing or thinking. Something more is at stake than just the cost of a transition in the way that someone accesses what is of value.

My proposal is that we fear the loss of a sense because in several respects our senses are distinctive sources of value. The fear is reasonable because it makes sense to fear the loss of such a distinctive source of value.

According to the view I want to propose, our senses are sources of value in a variety of domains, and what one reasonably fears is the loss of such a source of value. In the first place, our senses are valuable practically and epistemically. They help one to get around and to learn about the world. They do so because they provide information. In that respect, they are useful tools.

But there is more to the value of our senses. Our senses also are implicated in sensory pleasures and displeasures, like tasting delicious food, observing an eclipse, hearing lovely music, or smelling trash. Our senses play an aesthetic and an evaluative role. Consider sussing up a scenario you experience as good or bad in some evaluative respect, such as perceiving a swerving car to be dangerous or a person as attractive.[^4]

[^4]: This leaves open the precise role of the senses in such assessment. The Principle of Acquaintance, for example, states that adequate aesthetic judgment requires sense experience [see @Sauchelli:2025].

Even beyond this type of hedonic, aesthetic, or evaluative role, our senses play an underappreciated axiological role. They figure in our likes, dislikes, concerns, projects, and pastimes—the things we care about. Consider a simple example. If you are among roughly 1 in 10 people with the OR6A2 olfactory receptor gene variant that makes cilantro taste like soap [@Eriksson:2012], you are unlikely to favour and seek out certain cuisines, such as Mexican or Indian foods. Your sensory capacities shape your preferences.

How we organize our lives can rely in more significant and far-reaching ways on our sensory capacities. And it can be very unsettling when those capacities are disrupted. Think of a chef, in whose life taste and gustation play a central organizing role. Grant Achatz, head chef at Alinea in Chicago, was profoundly affected by his two-year loss of taste due to treatment for tongue cancer. He told Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*:

> I lived my whole life in the kitchen. Not only that, but it's the passion, it's the love for cooking and food. It's dictated my entire life—every aspect of it. So, in some ways, the thought of not being able to do that anymore radically affects your life. It was very strange to not be able to discern any flavor at all. It's funny because, clearly, you know you have to eat to live. But even knowing that, for me, there was no reason to eat. I had no interest in eating whatsoever. I would put something in my mouth—say a vanilla milkshake—and it tasted like nothing. [@Gross:2011]

In an episode of the Netflix documentary, *Chef's Table*, Achatz's business partner and co-author of *Life on the Line*, Nick Kokonas, said:

> He definitely did not want to exist without the ability to do what he viewed as his core personal identity. He wanted my approval to not have this dismembering surgery. He was gonna choose to die as gracefully as he possibly could. That's not a good place to get to. [@Gelb:2016; see also @Achatz:2011]

Or consider a musician, whose world revolves around their auditory capacities. How a musician spends their days—their routines, friendships, livelihood, geographic location, self-esteem, and identity—is organized in ways that turn on their ability to hear. Beethoven's deafness famously came as a profound disturbance.

> I can with truth say that my life is very wretched; for nearly 2 years past I have avoided all society, because I find it impossible to say to people, *I am deaf!* In any other profession this might be more tolerable, but in mine such a condition is truly frightful […]. [Beethoven 1801, quoted in @Thomas:2021, 2704]

These are not exceptional cases. Each of us finds our senses embedded in what makes our lives meaningful and worthwhile, in our identities and purpose. Think of how your senses figure in being an athlete, an artist, an academic, or a parent, and how losing a sense would impact those pursuits. John M Hull, a theology professor and author of *Touching the Rock: A Memoir of Blindness*, writes movingly about losing his ability to see his children and eventually to visually remember their faces. He describes how never having seen his youngest children affected the form of their relationship.[^5]

[^5]: Hull also vividly characterizes how his evaluative notion of a 'nice day' changed, after becoming blind, to an auditory one:

> Sometimes when I greet people by saying, 'Nice day!' they remain unresponsive or even appear surprised. The idea of a nice day is largely visual. A nice day occurs when there is a clear, blue sky. The sun will be shining and it may be reasonably warm, although even a bright clear day in the middle of winter will be called a 'nice day although a bit nippy'. A sighted person would not call it a nice day, let alone a lovely day if it were overcast. For me, the wind has taken the place of the sun, and a nice day is a day when there is a mild breeze. This brings into life all the sounds in my environment. The leaves are rustling, bits of paper are blowing along the pavement, the walls and corners of the large buildings stand out under the impact of the wind, which I feel in my hair and on my face, in my clothes. A day on which it was merely warm would, I suppose, be quite a nice day but thunder makes it more exciting, because it suddenly gives a sense of space and distance. Thunder puts a roof over my head, a very high, vaulted ceiling of rumbling sound. I realize that I am in a big place, whereas before there was nothing there at all. The sighted person always has a roof overhead, in the form of the blue sky or the clouds, or the stars at night. The same is true for the blind person of the sound of the wind in the trees. It creates trees; one is surrounded by trees whereas before there was nothing. The misunderstanding between me and the sighted arises when it is a mild day, even warm, with a light breeze but overcast. To the sighted, this would not be a nice day, because the sky is not blue. [@Hull:2013, 13–14]

My proposal is that we fear the loss of a sense due to the ways our senses serve as sources of value in several domains. Our senses have practical and epistemic value, given their informational role. They have hedonic and aesthetic value, given their evaluative role. And they play an influential but underappreciated axiological role in shaping and constituting our cares, concerns, and projects.

Our senses as sources of value

It is natural to ask whether our senses offer inherent value or only extrinsic and instrumental value. The senses clearly have extrinsic or instrumental value. They enable us to survive and to gain empirical knowledge. They make possible the pleasures of food, drink, art, and the body. They reveal or acquaint us with things we care about. They help us to achieve our goals and to pursue things that matter. The senses thus are tools or gateways to access things, experiences, or ends that have value.

Arguably, our senses also are sources of intrinsic or non-instrumental value. First, sensory experiences themselves can be inherently nice or unpleasant. Some philosophers have been inspired by the analogy with pain, which seems to have an inherently affective or evaluative valence (it feels bad), and argue that sensory experiences more generally are inherently pleasant or unpleasant [@Fulkerson:2020; @Jacobson:2021]. If a sensory experience is evaluatively valenced, then it is plausible it can offer inherent value. A sense therefore is a source or condition on such inherent value.[^6]

[^6]: One may wonder if a sense is only instrumentally valuable if it enables sensory experiences with inherent value. However, one does not have the sensory experience as distinct from the sense, so the sense is not an independent means to a distinct end. Instead, the sense is a constitutive source for the inherent value of the sensory experience.

This stance raises a tricky question. Is there some common phenomenal aspect shared by all and only sensory experiences with a specific valence? Or does desire, dislike, or another positive or negative evaluative attitude account for what makes the sensory aspect of an experience pleasant or unpleasant?

One might try to sidestep this issue by focusing on capacities, rather than experiences. Sometimes, possessing, exercising, or developing sensory capacities itself can have value, independently from whatever else it enables. A musician can value being able to identify a Gmaj7 or a Gmin7 chord in itself, for its own sake. Wine connoisseurs might care about being able to differentiate merlot from cabernet, not for peer approval, joy, or making a living as a sommelier or wine critic,

but just because it is a worthwhile activity, atelicly. The capacities themselves ground or serve as a source of value for a subject in their own right, rather than for the sake of pleasant experiences or anything else.

A reply is that having, using, and honing sensory capacities is valuable only if you already want or care about those things. So the capacities have value only in the context of one's desires or interests. This reply maintains that sensory capacities therefore lack inherent value.

Impasse threatens. The way forward is to distinguish two types of claim. The distinction concerns the scope and therefore the nature of the claim that something has value inherently or in itself.[^7] The first is about the basis for having value. It says that the instantiation of a value property depends entirely on the intrinsic features of an object. This corresponds to the metanormative claim that having value is an intrinsic property, rather than an extrinsic property, such as a response-dependent property. The second is about what ultimately has value for a subject. It says that an object is valuable for its own sake, rather than for the sake of something else that it enables or promotes. This corresponds to the normative claim that something has final or non-instrumental value, rather than mere instrumental value.[^8]

[^7]: @Korsgaard:1983, @Kagan:1998, and @Rabinowitz:1999 detail key arguments for differentiating distinct claims traditionally confounded in discussions of intrinsic value.

[^8]: @Rabinowitz:1999 call the first a question of *constitutive grounds* and the second a question of *supervenience base* for value claims.

Some say the second rather than the first is the customary way to interpret claims about intrinsic and extrinsic value. For instance, @Bradford:2020 says, 'I follow the literature and use "intrinsic value" to convey "final" or "non-instrumental" value. This is not to be confused with value solely in virtue of intrinsic properties' [236]. @Kagan:1998 recommends reserving *intrinsic value* for final or non-instrumental value. Others simply draw the distinction using *intrinsic/extrinsic* and *final/instrumental* [@Korsgaard:1983; @Rabinowitz:1999]. Either way, final value is a theoretically significant notion for axiology. @Rabinowitz:1999 [48–49] even suggest that because value in virtue of intrinsic features can be contingent, thus not essential, and because non-instrumental value can rely on extrinsic features (such as uniqueness), final value has greater normative relevance than intrinsic value.

With the second type of claim at stake, it is plausible that one can value pleasant or unpleasant experiences, or the possession, exercise,

or development of one’s sensory capacities, for their own sake, rather than for the sake of something else. And this is plausible even if their having value relies on one’s desires or other attitudes. So it is plausible that our senses offer final value rather than just instrumental value. And this is a way to interpret the claim that our senses are sources of inherent value.

Regardless of whether or not our senses are sources of inherent (intrinsic or final) value, the upshot is similar in the context of this paper. The value our senses offer extends to several domains. It runs deep, it has broad reach, and it is not readily replaced. The loss of such a source of value makes sense for a subject to fear.

Recalcitrance

Suppose the loss of a sense is not so bad, in the following respect. After the transition, it does not tend to leave a person worse off. There are several reasons why having lost a sense may not be as bad as a person imagines.

First, one may find new ways to access things one cares about—new sources for the same type of value. You may learn tactually to read using Braille, or use audio descriptions to appreciate dance after becoming blind [@Burke:2023]. You may learn to perceive music by holding a helium-filled mylar balloon to channel its vibrations, as deaf audiophile Bob Lichtenberg illustrates in the short film, *Listening* [@Bell:2021]. Second, one may come to value new and different types of things, or find wholly new sources of value. You may develop a new taste for music, or focus on developing, exercising, and refining the capacity to echolocate. You may cultivate abstract mathematical understanding. Third, one may cease to care about things that rely on a lost sense. Visual art or music may lose its interest once it is not accessible in the familiar way. A love for birdwatching may fade away.

On balance, in the long run, the axiological impact therefore might be neutral. Nevertheless, before losing a sense, the fear is stubborn. Why is the fear of losing a sense so recalcitrant?

Losing a sense is an epistemically and personally transformative experience, in Paul's [-@Paul:2014] sense. It radically alters not only the information you have, and thus your epistemic situation, but also your evaluative perspective. In particular, it affects what we may call your *sensory-evaluative landscape*, which reflects how your preferences, interests, and concerns are shaped by your senses. Losing a sense alters how the things you are disposed to care about turns on your sensory capacities—your *sensory axiology*.

But it is hard to grasp what it is like to occupy such a different

evaluative perspective [see especially @Paul:2014, ch. 2]. It is difficult for me to envision what it is like to love perceiving music tactually through a mylar balloon, or to experience gray, windy, wet weather as a nice day. And so one naturally views the world of a person without a given sense through the lens of one's own capacities, cares, and concerns. And that yields a fearworthy scenario, from one's present evaluative perspective. One evaluates the prospect of losing and being without a sense negatively, given one's present evaluative framework.

Thus, the fear reasonably persists. Still, even if the fear of losing a sense is substantively rational from the standpoint of one's present sensory-evaluative perspective, it nonetheless could be structurally irrational given one's overall evidence about the long-term well-being of those who have lost a sense. It helps to distinguish distinct objects of fear. Undergoing the loss of a sense may warrant one's fear due to the loss of a source of value, even if having lost a sense in the long run does not impact overall well-being in a way that warrants one's fear.

This is most evident for subjective well-being. Nonetheless, if a person's well-being is affected by external or objective factors alone, losing a sense could impact long-term well-being in ways that amount to real harms. In the real world, discrimination, fewer opportunities, and extra obstacles due to society or culture may make one objectively worse off. However, approaching our senses as sources of value can capture why. Senses enable a person to access value that otherwise is unavailable given one's context and culture. Losing access can be a harm and thus warrant fear, even if subjectively or hedonically one is left no worse off.

The process of evaluative change itself is a challenge. Retaining one's senses avoids the need to face the unknown, adapt to a new status quo, or reconstruct what may be a radically altered life, as the examples of Beethoven and Grant Achatz illustrate. My proposal anchors the account of what makes undergoing sensory transformation difficult in the ways our senses serve as sources of value.

Specific fears

Now turn to the second question. Why do we fear losing some senses more than others?
In addressing why people fear losing a sense, I have been speaking about our senses in general. But the fear of losing a sense is not monolithic. It varies from person to person, and from sense to sense. So I want to shift and consider individual senses. What in particular does one lose upon losing vision, audition, touch, taste, smell, or even pain, such that one reasonably fears its loss? This helps illuminate why the fear is unequally distributed among our senses.

It is helpful to think of each sense as a bundle or a family of perceptual capacities [@OCallaghan:2019]. From sense to sense, we can ask which capacities are common (such as the capacity to perceive shape, motion, or duration) and which capacities are unique (such as the capacity to perceive colour, pitch, or odor). The sensory capacities of distinct individuals may largely overlap, even while the details of one's specific repertoire may be distinctive.

According to this model, the partial loss of a sense is the loss of a subset of perceptual capacities, while complete loss of a sense is the loss of a full or complete bundle of perceptual capacities. Becoming blind is losing a bundle of capacities to perceive objects, shapes, colours, motion, and other features. Becoming deaf is losing capacities to perceive sounds, pitch, timbre, loudness, and so on. Similar claims hold for ageusia (gustation), anosmia (smell), and anaesthesia (touch, pain).

In considering what one fears about losing a sense, it helps to focus on such capacities. In particular, what is the inventory of capacities associated with a given sense? And what is their relationship to the sorts of things people care about? In what follows, I want to focus at a general level and defocus lots of interesting individual differences. And, to illustrate my approach, the following highlights the contrast between vision and audition. A similar approach is revealing in the context of the other senses.

Vision and autonomy

Let's start with vision. Vision involves a salient family of perceptual capacities. At a general level of description, vision reveals a certain distinctive range of spatial characteristics:

> *Internal* spatial relations among an object's parts, such as between the fingers and palm of a hand.

> *External* spatial relations among distinct objects, such as between two separate hands.

> *Dynamic* spatial features involving change over time, such as deformation and movement.

> *Perspectival* spatial relations, such as between a perceiver's point of view and a visible object.

> A *densely populated* spatial scene, in which each visual angle typically is occupied by something.

> A *bounded* spatial field, with a periphery and limits.

So vision reveals internally spatially structured objects, at a distance, moving and changing in relation to oneself and the surroundings, in a richly detailed but bounded spatial scene. This enables one to detect, differentiate, recognize, and reidentify things and features out in the world in relation to oneself. None of these capacities individually is exclusive to vision, but vision uniquely combines them.

This in turn enables one to act and react in relation to those things and features, in order to achieve one's aims and goals. If you want to shake my hand, pour a coffee, catch a falling leaf, navigate a new city, or find corn tortillas in the supermarket, vision helps equip you to do those things.

To the extent that vision is impaired, it does not fulfill these functions. And that changes what a person can do in an environment on the basis of perception. One's environment ceases to afford actions that rely on detailed information about spatial features and relations of dynamic objects at a distance in real time. This encompasses many of a sighted person's daily activities.

The expected upshot is to decrease one's sense of the experienced—perceived or felt—expansiveness of the surroundings, and of what one can do in one's detailed, extended environment. A sighted person can reasonably anticipate that such a contraction would diminish the range of potential actions perception enables. This is accentuated by the many ways in which our world is arranged for the sighted. If you are a sighted person, imagine shopping for groceries on your own without the use of your sight. Or imagine self-administering an at-home COVID-19 test, notoriously inaccessible to those with low vision [@Morris:2022].

This imagined reduction in the range of actions perception affords is reasonably anticipated to come at a cost to one's independence. A presently sighted person contemplating the loss of vision would be reasonable to fear a very salient loss of autonomy and freedom, especially given how our kinds of communities organize and navigate our build environments. And this is true even if eventually, overall, a person is not made worse off.

Hearing and communication

Hearing also is a rich source of information about one's surroundings. As I write, I hear quivering air brakes from a highway in the distance, a horn outside my window, steady pinging from the ventilation system, a door closing down the hall, and typing sounds through the wall. At different times, each of these things audibly appears in some direction at a distance from my location.

But audition reveals far less spatial detail than vision. Its spatial resolution is about an order of magnitude less than that of vision. One upshot is that auditory objects—things we hear—do not seem to have the richly detailed internal spatial structures of visual objects. They do not audibly appear to be made up of spatially arranged spatial parts or to have obvious shapes or sizes. And auditory perception does not rely on such internal spatial features for differentiating, recognizing, or reidentifying its objects.

The auditory scene also is not as richly or densely populated as the visual scene. Typically, not every spatial angle is audibly occupied by sound. The auditory scene is much more sparse. It is often more like seeing stars in the night sky, a fireworks display, or scattered clouds.

As a result, hearing often does not play the same pivotal role as vision in enabling one to navigate the environment and to cope with it independently. In this respect, anticipating the loss of hearing may stir up less fear about impacting one's agency and autonomy.

What more is to fear about the loss of hearing? Hearing is not simply impoverished when compared with vision. Hearing has the benefit of a 360-degree, unbounded spatial field. It also does not rely on direct physical gaze, sight lines, or having your eyes open. Because of this, hearing has an important alerting and orienting function. Without hearing, standard ringtones and alarms are not accessible (disability standards require hotel rooms with visual fire alarms and door knock alerts). You could not hear a rattlesnake or a vehicle approaching from behind (sound design for electric vehicle safety is a critical emerging field). This all can be anticipated to impact one's sense of safety and security.

This is important, but there is more to say. Auditory perception relies on patterns of pitch, timbre, and loudness. This detailed qualitative profile is critical in detecting and differentiating distinctive sonic signatures of things like gas or electric vehicles, specific musical instruments (a piano or a guitar), cowboy chords or jazz chords, a vacuum cleaner versus a fish tank, or the voices of different people. The capacity to recognize and reidentify such things sonically surely would be something to miss. But it may be less relevant to agency and autonomy than spatial vision, and less relevant to safety and security than spatial hearing.

However, what is notable in this connection is that hearing has a richly detailed, dynamic temporal structure. Audition's temporal resolution is roughly an order of magnitude better than vision's. Time plays a structural role in audition that is akin to the role of space in vision [@OCallaghan:2016]. Audition's objects have duration and survive change over time. But they seem to persist by occupying time

and having temporal extent. Hearing reveals the structures of persisting events in time. By virtue of this, it reveals to us not just the furniture, but what is happening to it. It tells us what things are doing—their activities. (The difference between a chord and an arpeggio is illustrative.) Hearing thus enables rich access to things that are dynamic, like music, vocalizations, and, crucially, speech and spoken language. These things matter, and it makes sense to fear their loss.

That brings us to the crux. For a typical hearing person, losing audition does involve something distinctive and quite general to be feared. In hearing communities, due to the auditory capacities I have described, auditory perception plays an outsized, predominant role in communication. Hearing is *the* primary way most hearing people access spoken language in real time. Real-time communication allows us to share pertinent information, express attitudes and emotions, and enjoy social connection. Most people value these things—testimony, knowing what others are thinking and feeling, and connecting socially and emotionally. In verbal linguistic communities, auditory capacities are an important way to access and enjoy them.

But most hearing people do not use sign language or another inherently visual or tactual spoken language. So, without the use of hearing, most hearing people would be at a loss in real-time communication among either verbal speakers or sign language users. Therefore, for a typical hearing person, it would be reasonable to fear the loss of access to information, insights into other people's minds and ideas, and social connection that verbal linguistic communication makes possible.

In summary, for many hearing people, the primary value of hearing is its social and communicative value. One would be reasonable to fear this loss. And this would be a relatively distinctive sort of loss that stems from the loss of hearing, when compared with the loss of another sense, like vision, touch, taste, or smell.

Contingency

One may question the specific nature of the relationship between vision and autonomy, or between hearing and communication. In particular, what is special about how vision's spatiality enables independence or hearing's temporality contributes to communication?

My claim is not that vision and autonomy are inherently connected. Vision and spatiality alone do not secure independence. Nor is spatial vision necessary for autonomy. Skilled navigation with echolocation, freedom to stay securely in hotel rooms, and communicating efficiently with others illustrate that spatial and non-spatial hearing also serve independence.

Nonetheless, autonomy as such need not require vision in order for the sort of independence that relies on visual capacities to be salient, even most salient, for a person who imagines losing their sight. Humanity has structured and organized environments and practices in ways that rely on visual spatial abilities for navigation and interaction. Think of roadways, stadiums, office buildings, even forest paths. Things could be designed for echolocation or tactual navigation. But, as they stand, many people would be at a disadvantage in acting on their aims to achieve their goals without sight. It makes sense to fear this loss of independence and autonomy.

Correspondingly, hearing and linguistic communication are not inherently connected. Hearing dynamically does not suffice for discerning spoken language. Nor is temporal hearing required for linguistic communication. Sign language shows that vision's temporal resolution supports real-time linguistic communication. Touch is enough for Morse code. Not all senses have something like this potential. Taste and smell would be inefficient. But even written text and Braille, both spatial language forms, show that communicating need not rely on perception's having refined temporal resolution.

As things are, many people do rely on speech. Humanity, being equipped with keen articulatory capacities, exploits hearing's richly developed temporal capacities in dynamic spoken communication. Things could be otherwise. Visual language could predominate, or most people could be fluent using distinct language modalities. Deaf culture, specifically its fully expressive visual communication, demonstrates that reliance on hearing is contingent.

Nonetheless, for most people, real-time linguistic communication does rely on perceiving spoken utterances in a way that relies on hearing and its temporal capacities. For those immersed in current hearing culture, access to linguistic communication therefore is significant when one considers losing the ability to hear. From the standpoint of what matters, it makes sense to fear its loss.

In summary, each sense comprises a distinctive set of capacities. Notably, vision excels spatially, and audition excels temporally. This enables distinctive abilities, such as navigating richly structured three-dimensional environments and discerning detailed temporal dynamics. Such capacities respectively amplify one's sense of agency and support efficient communication with spoken language. But autonomy is not inherently visual, and linguistic communication is not inherently auditory. Each sense is embedded in a culture that assumes and takes advantage of its capacities to structure the environment and social interactions. So it is partly contingent how much we rely on vision to navigate and hearing to communicate. As things stand, the prospect of losing sight for many people is a threat to independence and autonomy, while the loss of hearing threatens to undermine

communication with others. Vision and audition thus contribute in distinctive ways to what makes most sense to fear in losing a sense.

There is more to say in this vein about each of our other senses. Taste is one of the most reliable sources of daily sensory pleasure. Olfaction, too, can be sweet or noxious but also triggers complex affective profiles connected with memory and emotion. Touch, bodily awareness, and even pain would be tough to lose in their own unique ways. Each sense is a distinctive source of value. But vision and audition offer enough to illustrate why the fear of losing a sense can differ from sense to sense and from person to person.[^9]

[^9]: Olfaction raises the intriguing prospect that the psychological impact of losing a sense may exceed what one anticipates. Findings such as those of @BurgesWatson.etal:2021 suggest disproportionate fear due to underestimating olfaction and flavor as sources of value.

Conclusions

Let’s return to the original questions. The first question is: Why fear losing a sense modality? My answer is that our senses are distinctive sources of value. They are sources of value in several domains. They offer practical and epistemic value, in virtue of their informational role. They are sources for hedonic and aesthetic value, and they figure in sensory evaluation and assessment. Moreover, given how our senses shape and figure deeply in our cares, concerns, and projects, they have a much broader axiological role and normative significance than theorists typically have described.[^10]

[^10]: The senses also matter in the moral domain, though saying why turns on theoretical questions beyond this paper’s scope. Perhaps the point is clearest in the context of the capabilities approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum, which describes a foundational role for the development of distinctively human capabilities, including sensory capacities [see especially @Nussbaum:2000, 78–79].

The senses also serve as sources of value in differing manners. They are valuable instrumentally, given that our many aims, goals, projects, and plans rely on them. I also proposed that our senses are sources of final or non-instrumental value. Some sensory experiences may be pleasant or unpleasant in themselves. Beyond this, possessing, exercising, and developing sensory capacities can itself be a source of value—for its own sake, or in its own right, rather than for the sake of something else.

What we fear is the loss of these significant, deeply embedded sources of value in our lives. That fear seems warranted from one’s present sensory-evaluative perspective, even if the evidence shows that the loss of a sense ultimately is unlikely to leave a person worse off.

The second question is: Why fear losing some senses more than others? The first part of my answer is that each sense encompasses a distinctive set of capacities. So the senses vary in which specific things and features they can reveal, and in which ways. Accordingly, each sense grounds or enables activities and experiences of a distinctive sort. Some of these are bound to be more important than others.

The other part of my answer is that what value a person derives from their senses also depends on what matters specifically to that individual. Given one's nature and circumstances, and one's likes and concerns, preferences vary between people. Losing one sense rather than another is bound to impact people differently.

I have offered materials to explain why the fear of losing a sense can be unequally distributed across senses, for a person or a population. However, I have not proposed or defended any particular ordering. This leaves open empirical and theoretical questions about the relative value of our distinct senses, and the degree to which this relies on nature and culture. Nonetheless, at the most general level, something like agency and autonomy may win out over communication, on average and across communities and populations. If so, that could explain why people fear the loss of vision more than the loss of hearing.

As a final aside, for my own part, when I think in the abstract about individual senses and their distinctive capacities and axiological roles, it loosens my grip on any particular ranking or hierarchy. This deflates differences in the strength of fear that surrounds the prospect of losing one sense or another. But reflecting on the activities and experiences I care most about strengthens my grip again, in a way that is more personal.