

THE PRUDENT CONSCIENCE VIEW

Brian Besong

ABSTRACT: Moral intuitionism, which claims that some moral seemings are justification-conferring, has become an increasingly popular account in moral epistemology. Defenses of the position have largely focused on the standard account, according to which the justification-conferring power of a moral seeming is determined by its phenomenal credentials alone. Unfortunately, the standard account is a less plausible version of moral intuitionism because it does not take etiology seriously. In this paper, I provide an outline and defense of a non-standard account of moral intuitionism that I dub the “Prudent Conscience View.” According to this view, phenomenal credentials only partially determine the justification-conferring power of a moral seeming, for a seeming’s justification-conferring power is also determined by its etiology. In brief, a moral seeming is justification-conferring to the degree that the conscience that gave rise to it is functioning properly, and a person’s conscience functions properly to the degree that the person is prudent.

Moral intuitionism can be understood as the claim that some moral seemings are capable of conferring epistemic justification onto beliefs formed in response to them. A seeming is a mental state about a proposition p that involves favoring or supporting p with, as Tolhurst puts it,

a “felt veridicality,” or put differently by Chudnoff, a “presentational phenomenology.”¹

Seemings are ubiquitous—it seems presently to me that I’m at my computer, that I have hands, that $2+2=4$, and that killing the innocent is wrong—and seemings can be distinguished from related mental states like judgments, beliefs, or inclinations to believe.²

Recently, moral intuitionism has become an increasingly popular account in moral epistemology for a number of reasons. However, defenses of the position have largely focused on what can be described as the standard account, according to which the justification-conferring power of a moral seeming is determined by its phenomenal credentials alone. In this paper, I provide an outline and defense of a non-standard account of moral intuitionism that I dub the “Prudent Conscience View.” According to this view, phenomenal credentials only partially determine the justification-conferring power of a moral seeming. The justification-conferring power of a moral seeming is also determined by the seeming’s etiology, as I will explain.

In order to argue for the Prudent Conscience View, I will first look at the standard account of moral intuitionism and its motivations. I will then show that the standard account is less plausible for not taking etiology seriously, while the Prudent Conscience View is better fit to

¹ William Tolhurst, “Seemings,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 293–302; Elijah Chudnoff, “What Intuitions Are Like,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2011): 625–54.

² cf. Andrew Cullison, “What Are Seemings?,” *Ratio* 23 (2010): 260–74; Michael Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30–55; Matthew Skene, “Seemings and the Possibility of Epistemic Justification,” *Philosophical Studies* 163 (2013): 539–59.

explain cases wherein etiology intuitively seems to matter, as well as explain a more robust phenomenology of experiences attendant upon moral belief formation.

MORAL INTUITIONISM: THE STANDARD ACCOUNT

Advocates of the standard account of moral intuitionism (henceforth: SMI) take the phenomenology of a moral seeming (henceforth: a seeming) to alone determine its justification-conferring power. Hence, by SMI, the justification, or degree thereof, conferred by a seeming depends upon its internally accessible features—features which we can call a seeming’s “phenomenal credentials.” Thus, for one of the newer varieties of SMI championed by Michael Huemer, for any undefeated moral seeming that p , a belief that p is prima facie justified for S if it seems to S that p .³ According to the more popular version of SMI championed by Robert Audi and others, a moral belief that p is non-inferentially justified for S if p is self-evident for S .⁴

³ Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 99; cf. Matthew Bedke, “Ethical Intuitions: What They Are, What They Are Not, and How They Justify,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (2008): 253–70.

⁴ Robert Audi, “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008): 475–92; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 247; Philip Stratton-Lake, “Introduction” in Philip Stratton-Lake, ed., *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 1–28. This is not to say that a belief is non-inferentially justified, according to advocates of the first camp, *only* if it is self-evident; cf. Robert Audi, *Moral Perception* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Robert Audi, “Moral Perception and Moral Knowledge,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 84 (2010): 79–97.

Although many advocates of the latter version of SMI do not ordinarily appeal to seemings in order to explain epistemic justification for moral beliefs, they also do not ordinarily provide accompanying accounts of what self-evidence consists in. An exception is Audi, whose work on self-evidence has been deeply influential amongst those who advocate this version of SMI.⁵ For Audi, a self-evident proposition p meets the following three conditions: (1) p is true, (2) in virtue of an adequate understanding of p , one is justified in believing p , and (3) if one believes p on the basis of an adequate understanding, then one knows p .⁶

However, Audi and most proponents of this version of SMI are committed to epistemic internalism with regard to justification (as I will explain below), according to which, as Audi puts it, “what justifies a belief, i.e., the ground of its justification, is ... (internally) accessible: that to which one has access by introspection or reflection”⁷ and the notion of “adequate

⁵ For instance, see Shafer-Landau, *op. cit.*, p. 247 and Stratton-Lake, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–23. Both of these prominent accounts draw on Audi’s notions of self-evidence. Thus, Shafer-Landau cites Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 47f and Robert Audi, “Self-Evidence,” *Noûs* 33 (1999): 205–28; Stratton-Lake cites Robert Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics” in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, eds., *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 101–36.

⁶ Audi, “Self-Evidence,” pp. 206f.

⁷ Robert Audi, “An Internalist Theory of Normative Grounds,” *Philosophical Topics* 29 (2001): 19–46; cf. Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 9–11; Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 218–21, 229–

understanding” to which Audi appeals in explicating self-evidence is ambiguous on this point. For “understanding” can be understood in at least two ways: as success-entailing (similar to a factive state), or not. Understanding a proposition *p* is taken as a success-entailing state if, in addition to seeming to understand *p*, one must also *actually* (i.e., successfully) understand *p*. However, actually understanding a proposition appears to involve an external relation between an agent’s cognitive state and the proposition itself, a relation to which it is implausible to believe one might have introspective access. Hence, what Audi and likeminded advocates of SMI must have in mind when appealing to an “adequate understanding” as what justifies belief in a self-evident proposition, is a non-success-entailing state of cognizing a proposition that involves certain phenomenal features constitutive of self-evidence (e.g., conceptual containment).⁸ We can call these latter features a proposition’s “self-evidential phenomenal credentials” and plausibly recast the thesis of this camp as the view that a moral seeming is justification-conferring when it is characterized by self-evidential phenomenal features, whatever those features end up being according to advocates of the view.

What motivates SMI? It is first helpful to identify motivations for moral intuitionism, generally (henceforth: intuitionism). I believe there are at least three recognized motivations of intuitionism and at least one often unacknowledged (or hidden) motivation. I’ll explain each in

31. Elsewhere, Audi advocates externalism with regard to *knowledge*, cf. *The Structure of Justification*, p. 334.

⁸ If so, this fits other plausible accounts of the self-evident, e.g., Conee’s “Self—Support,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2012): 419–46, and fits Audi’s explicit endorsement of moral seemings as being justificatory in “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” pp. 447f.

turn. The first recognized motivation is that intuitionism provides an intuitively plausible account of a common experience, namely, very often we do find ourselves believing moral propositions whose only apparent support comes from the fact that they seem true. In many cases, upon reflection, we also believe that this is epistemologically appropriate, and intuitionism makes sense of that. Second, intuitionism provides a plausible solution to the regress problem in moral epistemology. By endorsing intuitionism, one can deny that justification for one's moral beliefs must rely upon an infinitely long or circular chain of inferences. Instead, some seemings are regress stoppers. That is, seemings have justification-conferring power, but not being beliefs, they are not in need of justification themselves. Hence, beliefs formed in response to seemings will be justified non-inferentially, and thus be properly basic for an agent.⁹ Third, many advocates of intuitionism are also proponents of moral realism, particularly a non-naturalist version of moral realism. Intuitionism provides a particularly fitting epistemological companion to non-naturalist moral realism because it's hard to see how else one might know of non-natural facts like these other than by intuition, or their seeming true upon reflection.¹⁰ After all, it is prima facie strange to think we could simply perceive non-natural facts by our ordinary sense-

⁹ cf. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology" in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, eds., *Metaethics after Moore* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 340–343; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 185; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Relativity and Intuitionism," *Noûs* 36 (2002): 305–28.

¹⁰ Heumer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, pp. 6f, conflates moral intuitionism with non-natural moral realism, although it seems like they are independent theses (particularly if Huemer identifies moral intuitionism with SMI).

faculties, or infer them straightforwardly from natural facts. Intuitionism provides a more suitable alternative to these rival epistemological views.

What is the hidden motivation? Intuitionists are not (ordinarily) moral skeptics. That is, intuitionists generally endorse the view that there is some moral knowledge. But this endorsement is consistent with a pessimism about moral knowledge, according to which moral knowledge is very hard to acquire and is thus relatively rare—perhaps the acquisition of only a handful of individuals in each generation. Few intuitionists would buy that, and intuitionism is easily conjoined to two related epistemological theses that stave off this sort of pessimism. The first is what we might call the “level playing field thesis,” the second is what we might call the “thesis of relative ease.” According to the level playing field thesis, apart from some special areas that require expertise regarding natural facts (e.g., medical ethics), ordinary agents are about equally capable of acquiring knowledge of moral facts. Some facts may be more difficult to know than others, but primarily due to features of the facts, not features of agents. According to the thesis of relative ease, a large number of (or even most) moral facts are sufficiently clear that ordinary agents will experience seemings that they are true after a small to moderate quantity of time reflecting upon them. How much time? It depends upon the fact (and the intuitionist), but it seems as though many would think about a half of an hour of reflection per proposition would be sufficient, and perhaps much less reflection for some general propositions.¹¹ Intuitionism makes both theses plausible because the position does not make

¹¹ Do any intuitionists openly endorse these theses? Audi seems to be the most forthcoming when he writes “An adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition, p, does imply (at least in a rational person) a disposition to believe it, indeed, one strong enough so that there should be an explanation for non-belief given comprehending consideration of p” in “Intuition, Inference,

moral knowledge dependent upon, for instance, a great deal of time spent in reflection, special experience, or unique reasoning capacities. Ordinary agents going about their ordinary lives will be capable of acquiring much moral knowledge through intuition.

If these are the motivations for endorsing intuitionism, why endorse the standard account (SMI)? It seems like the chief motivation is that SMI is an intuitively appealing account of intuitionism for epistemic internalists.¹² As indicated above, epistemic internalists endorse an awareness requirement for justification, such that justification-conferring power is restricted to

and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” p. 488. Audi does not consider self-evident moral propositions to be a very narrow set, considering even some highly particular propositions to be self-evident (e.g., that I should not burn that guest with a red-hot poker, *ibid.*, p. 479).

Consequently, it seems that Audi would agree that a rather large set of moral propositions are such that ordinary people will, by and large, believe them following a small to moderate amount of time spent in reflection upon them. For, why else would it be apt to press another for an explanation of non-belief if, for instance, some ordinary agents have a much more difficult time apprehending the truth of ordinary self-evident moral propositions, or if it takes a rather long period of time for ordinary agents to apprehend the truth of these propositions?

¹² cf. Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 57f; Shafer-Landau, *op. cit.*, pp. 272–5; Daniel Star, “Moral Knowledge, Epistemic Externalism, and Intuitionism,” *Ratio* 21 (2008): 329–43; Shafer-Landau has explicitly endorsed a version of epistemic externalism, though he does not explain how his endorsement of reliabilism fits with what otherwise appears to be an endorsement of SMI. I will thus treat his account as an endorsement of SMI, though those who are attracted to a view like his may be more amenable to the revisions I suggest to SMI later in the paper.

that (e.g., evidence, truth-indicators) for which an agent is aware or is potentially aware. SMI satisfies this requirement in a straightforward and plausible way, as seemings (and more specifically, a seeming's phenomenal credentials) are paradigmatically the sorts of things of which one is or can be aware.

The problem is that in embracing epistemic internalism, advocates of SMI cannot take etiology seriously. Yet, as I will now seek to show, etiology matters—particularly so when it comes to moral seemings—consequently, those attracted to intuitionism should not endorse the standard account.

ETIOLOGY MATTERS

Consideration of three cases should help illustrate why theses in moral epistemology must take etiology seriously.

MATURITY: When Dominic was young, it seemed self-evident to him that occasionally getting drunk constitutes morally acceptable behavior. Now that he has grown older, it seems self-evident to him that drunkenness is a vice that always ought to be avoided.

Cases like MATURITY show that one's level of moral maturity can affect the moral seemings one experiences. Yet SMI appears to appraise both seemings described in MATURITY as having approximately the same justification-conferring power insofar as they have approximately the same (self-evidential) phenomenal features for their support. In contrast to SMI's appraisal, however, it seems more plausible to think that the seeming Dominic experienced when he grew

older has more justification-conferring power than the seeming he experienced when he was young, despite their equivalent phenomenal credentials.

ENTHUSIASM: Almost everyone who knows Patricia describes her as having a very enthusiastic personality. Just last week, after a discussion with them on the subject, she told her friends that it now *very* strongly and self-evidently seemed to her that killing non-human animals for the purposes of eating them is wrong. The friends who persuaded her on this point agreed, but clarified that they did not experience seemings about this as strongly as what Patricia described experiencing.

ENTHUSIASM, and cases like it, illustrate that largely non-cognitive aspects of an individual's character can affect the phenomenal features of her moral seemings. People who are "passionate" or "enthusiastic" characteristically experience seemings that are phenomenally stronger than seemings experienced by their non-enthusiastic counterparts. SMI therefore suggests that enthusiastic individuals often have a greater degree of justification conferred onto their seemings-based beliefs than the seemings-based beliefs of their less passionate counterparts. This is counterintuitive. It seems more plausible to think that the seemings of enthusiastic individuals have no greater justification-conferring power than the seemings of their less passionate peers, despite the phenomenal disparity.

DISAGREEMENT: Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Gustoff are professors of philosophy working in the same department. One day over lunch, Dr. Gustoff confessed that he has been thinking very deeply about morality these past few years and it seems strongly and self-

evidently to him that the poor, weak, and ugly should be treated with as much contempt as possible. For, he continues, they are repulsive and deserve to be treated as such – what could be more self-evident than that? Dr. Ferguson explains that it seems strongly and self-evidently to him that the poor, weak, and ugly should be treated with nobility. Upon disclosure of the disagreement, both confess that they have no additional evidence for their disputed beliefs.

DISAGREEMENT, and cases like it, indicate that the seemings experienced by apparent peers can be highly variable and have generally equivalent phenomenal credentials. SMI suggests that in DISAGREEMENT, Dr. Gustoff and Dr. Ferguson have equally good epistemic support for their disputed beliefs. If SMI is right, then Dr. Gustoff and Dr. Ferguson should consider their disputed beliefs to be equally well supported by the evidence adduced in the disagreement (to wit, their seeming's respective phenomenal credentials). Given that the disputed beliefs can't both be true, and given that they have no other evidence that might count as a symmetry-breaker, it is plausible to think that this disagreement generates defeaters against both beliefs for both agents.¹³ However, it's more plausible to say that Dr. Ferguson should not consider Dr. Gustoff's

¹³ According to the popular "equal weight view," peers should always withhold judgment about their disputed beliefs after the disclosure of a disagreement unless there is a clear epistemic asymmetry between them, cf. Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement" in Stephen Hetherington, ed., *Epistemology Futures* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 216–36. One does not need to embrace this view to see the more benign point, relevant here to SMI's analysis of DISAGREEMENT, that when two conflicting beliefs are

moral belief to be as equally well supported as his own (and thus not withhold judgment regarding the truth of his own disputed belief), despite the two beliefs having equally strong phenomenal credentials. For Dr. Gustoff's moral character is flawed in such a way that it now gives rise to aberrant seemings with strong phenomenal support.

In MATURITY, ENTHUSIASM, and DISAGREEMENT, SMI gives us the wrong results precisely because it does not consider the etiological formation of a moral seeming to determine, even partially, its justification-conferring power. That is to say, SMI doesn't take etiology seriously, but there are solid grounds for thinking that etiology matters.¹⁴ As a way of introducing and arguing for the alternative view I advance in this paper, I will sketch how SMI might be amended so to make it more plausible. Two simple changes are necessary.

First, it is plausible to say, with SMI, that the phenomenal credentials of a seeming state are important in appraising its justification-conferring power, but SMI is wrong to stop there. As analysis of MATURITY, ENTHUSIASM, and DISAGREEMENT show, the justification-conferring power of a seeming must also be at least partially determined by how the seeming arises. There

evidentially equally well supported, it is plausible to think one should withhold judgment until some symmetry-breaker can be found.

¹⁴ cf. John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 18ff, 44. Advocates of SMI have occasionally sought to incorporate etiological features into their accounts, but as etiological features are not the sorts of things of which one is aware or potentially aware, these features have not been completely integrated in their accounts of justification-conferral. For instance, Audi appeals to the intuitions of *ordinary* agents in *The Good in the Right*, p. 43, but does not explain how this ordinariness might function in appraising justification-conferring power.

are presently two rival accounts of how etiology functions in justification-conferral.¹⁵ The first is process reliabilism, as pioneered by Goldman¹⁶ and the second is proper functionalism, popularly defended by Plantinga and Bergmann.¹⁷ Though I will not defend the point at length here, between the two, proper functionalism appears the more appealing account because it is independently plausible and because, unlike process reliabilism, it does not suffer from the generality problem.¹⁸

¹⁵ Truth-tracking theories pioneered by Nozick in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), chap. 3, and Dretzke in “Conclusive Reasons,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1971): 1–22, and “Epistemic Operators,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970): 1007–23, are worth mentioning, though they are now largely considered to be defunct views because of their denial of the closure principle, cf. Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem,” *The Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 1–52, as well as the large number of counterexamples they face, cf. Steven Luper-Foy, ed., *The Possibility of Knowledge: Nozick and His Critics*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1987).

¹⁶ Alvin Goldman, “A Causal Theory of Knowing,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967): 357–72.

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, “Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 (1988): 1–50; Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Bergmann, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Earl Conee, “The Specificity of the Generality Problem,” *Philosophical Studies* 163 (2013): 751–62; Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, “The Generality Problem for Reliabilism,” *Philosophical Studies*, 89 (1998): 1–29; Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 6.

Second, one must add that *cultivation* improves the function of the faculty that gives rise to moral seemings. We can call the faculty that gives rise to moral seemings (among its other functions) the “conscience,” following long-established usage. Thus, the conscience functions properly to the degree that it has been cultivated in the right sort of ways. It is difficult to tell, but some faculties may work much as they ought in individuals without much cultivation (e.g., sight, touch). Why think the proper function of the conscience depends upon cultivation, instead of thinking (pace the level playing field and relative ease theses) that the conscience naturally works properly? Among other reasons, cases like MATURITY strongly suggest that the uncultivated state of the moral faculty is not completely dependable.¹⁹ Conversely, the moral seemings of those who have spent time and effort developing their own intellectual and moral maturity are far more trustworthy. What does maturation consist in? Arguably, the relevant sort of moral maturity arises from the development of a wisdom about action that Aristotle termed “phronesis” but which has since been called “prudence.” Thus, in brief, the conscience functions properly, and confers justification, to the degree that an agent is prudent.

THE PRUDENT CONSCIENCE VIEW

The prudent conscience view (henceforth: PCV), embraces both revisions I have suggested for SMI. For PCV, a properly functioning conscience confers justification onto one’s appropriately formed moral beliefs in proportion to a person’s prudence level. Some explanation is necessary. It’s hard to tell if seemings are necessary precursors to all rationally formed beliefs, but I will suppose here that they are not. If not, then seemings are very common intermediaries

¹⁹ cf. Michael DePaul, “Argument and Perception: The Role of Literature in Moral Inquiry,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 552–65.

that confer justification from the conscience to moral beliefs. They are produced by the conscience and derive their justification-conferring power from the propriety of their etiological formation. Their phenomenological credentials are often the best *internal* means by which to determine the degree of justification they are capable of conferring, for phenomenal credentials are part of what the conscience produces and are often what prudent agents must depend upon as at least partially dependable and trustworthy. But seemings can only confer as much justification as they possess from the conscience, so although one has prima facie justification for believing those moral propositions that seem true, the final determination of a seeming's justification-conferring power is not made on the basis of its phenomenal credentials. It is instead determined by the agent's prudence level at the time the seeming was experienced. Beliefs formed independently of seemings are justified in proportion to the agent's level of prudence at the time the belief was formed.²⁰

²⁰ Though I will not defend the point here, it seems to me that Aquinas's own view of moral knowledge also involves some sort of epistemic externalism, particularly given his descriptions of "connatural" knowledge, cf. Taki Suto, "Virtue and Knowledge: Connatural Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2004): 61–79. What does PCV say of those moral beliefs (e.g., that murder is wrong) that one continues to have from a period of moral immaturity (or lack of prudence) to a point of moral maturity? Beliefs like these are often consciously reaffirmed (e.g., by reconsideration and an act of internal assent) after their initial formation. In those cases where the belief has been consciously reaffirmed, the justification of the belief depends not upon the prudence level of the agent at the time the belief was initially formed, but instead upon the prudence level of the agent at the most recent time at which the

PCV thus agrees that some moral seemings are justification-conferring. The degree of justification conferred by seemings depends upon (1) the seeming's phenomenal credentials, and (2) the agent's level of prudence. Why think that (1) is important, rather than eliminable in preference to (2)? Among other reasons, a properly functioning conscience will produce seemings with a variety of phenomenal credentials. Though the conscience itself determines the total justification possibly conferred by any one seeming, *ceteris paribus*, seemings with weaker phenomenal credentials will confer less justification than seemings with stronger phenomenal credentials, even when a conscience is functioning with the same degree of propriety in producing both seemings.²¹ Given these details, PCV is a variety of intuitionism in moral epistemology, but it is a non-standard account. As a non-standard account, PCV enjoys the well-recognized motivations discussed above in favor of intuitionism; yet, it denies the epistemic internalism that appears central to advocacy of SMI. Now that I've introduced PCV, I will

belief was consciously reaffirmed. This is the case both for seeming-based beliefs and beliefs formed independently of seemings.

²¹ An agent's prudence level determines the maximal degree of a seeming's justification-conferring power, but the seeming's phenomenological credentials can partially defeat the seeming's justification-conferring power when the phenomenal credentials are weak. As I will explain, however, PCV has room to make sense of a richer variety of phenomenal credentials than merely "strong" or "weak." For present purposes, I understand the strength of a seeming to depend upon to its relative phenomenal vivacity. I take the account given above to be true even of the enthusiast, though I think having an enthusiastic personality is indicative of some lack of prudence, as I will explain below. Consequently, I do not think the greater phenomenal strength of the enthusiast's seemings offers her an epistemic advantage.

expand upon prudence and the conscience before relying upon the details of this account to argue that PCV is more plausible than SMI.

What is prudence? It is often easier to point to exemplars of the virtue than to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for its exemplification.²² For instance, assuming the veracity of descriptions given of him in the Platonic dialogues, I take Socrates to have possessed a high degree of prudence. Although other accounts of prudence are available to advocates of PCV, I favor Aquinas's, according to which the virtue of prudence has three stages, namely, proper moral deliberation, proper judgment, and proper action.²³ Proper moral deliberation involves considering the relevant facts in the right ways. Proper judgment involves drawing an appropriate conclusion from proper deliberation. Proper action involves employing the conclusion drawn by proper judgment in a way that the agent wills to pursue what is good and avoid what is evil.²⁴ Virtues are habits. Thus, to the degree that an agent habitually deliberates,

²² cf. Linda Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 41 (2010): 41–57.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II Q. 47, a. 8–9.

²⁴ What more is involved in proper deliberation, judgment, and action? Aquinas indicates there are eight constitutive (or "quasi-integral") parts. He writes "Of these eight, five belong to prudence as a cognitive virtue, namely, 'memory,' 'reasoning,' 'understanding,' 'docility' and 'shrewdness': while the three others belong thereto, as commanding and applying knowledge to action, namely, 'foresight,' 'circumspection' and 'caution,'" trans. Fathers of the English Dominican province (New York NY: Benziger Brothers, 1920), II–II Q.48, a.1. One might think that intuitions about morality are necessary precursors to the formation of the virtue of prudence, and I agree. Aquinas takes people to have a natural aptitude to the virtues (including prudence, cf. I–II Q. 95, a.1). One way to take this is that people will naturally experience a certain range of

judges, and acts well, he is prudent. To the degree that the habit of any of these three stages is imperfect, the agent is less than fully prudent.²⁵ As a habit, one's prudence level is determined

moral seemings, which by PCV are increasingly epistemically justified as one follows the norms of prudence. That will involve, among other things, being attentive to and applying these naturally experienced seemings in the right ways.

²⁵ Is it possible for an agent to be completely imprudent, such that his conscience fails to work properly? Yes and no. Even in the very rare circumstance that an agent was completely imprudent and his conscience functioned improperly, the phenomenal credentials supporting the seemings still matter and have justification-conferring power. However, it would be prudent for an agent to trust those of his moral seemings that appear to him best, in these circumstances. Hence, an agent's forming a belief based upon a seeming that has justification-conferring power from its phenomenal credentials would be a prudent act, and the conscience would confer some nominal degree of justification to that belief (in addition to the justification conferred by the phenomenological credentials of the seeming). In this way, the conscience can never be so completely malformed that it ceases to have justification-conferring power. Characteristic forms of imprudence are thoughtlessness, or lack of proper moral deliberation, indecisiveness, negligence, and a sort of self-imposed blindness to moral norms or facts about concrete circumstances, cf. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, trans. Richard Winston, et. al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 19. Characteristic forms of vices often confused for prudence include the application of parts of prudence to bad goals, or immoral means used to achieve otherwise good ends, and an over-solicitousness about the future or matters unrelated and irrelevant to moral goodness, cf. Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 78; Pieper, *op.*

diachronically; consequently, an agent who presently acts prudently and has been cultivating the virtue for the past few years is, *ceteris paribus*, less prudent than an agent who is presently acting prudently and has been cultivating the virtue throughout his life.²⁶

cit., pp. 19–21. This contrasts sharply with contemporary usage of the term “prudence,” which tends to conflate prudence with the vices characteristically confused for prudence, e.g., Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, pp. 20, 162.

²⁶ For more on Aquinas’s notion of prudence, see Ralph M. McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), chap. 7; Pieper, *op. cit.*, chap. 1. For PCV, would a swampman doppelganger (cf. Ernest Sosa, “Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology,” *Noûs* 27 (1993): 51–65) of a prudent agent, say Socrates, be epistemically justified in his moral beliefs? This depends upon whether or not habits like prudence are exhaustively supervenient upon the physical (without, say, having some immaterial components); but, suppose such a supervenience relation holds. In that case, the agent would be prudent, and his moral beliefs justified. However, there are at least two ways to determine the doppelganger’s degree of prudence, and I am neutral between both proposals. That is, one might think the diachronic measure of the doppelganger’s prudence level includes Socrates’s history (of whom the doppelganger is a duplicate) or not. If it does, then Socrates and his doppelganger have the same degree of prudence at the moment of duplication; if the diachronic measure of the doppelganger does not include Socrates’s history—the measure instead starting at the moment of duplication—then Socrates would be more prudent than his doppelganger at the moment of duplication, even though the doppelganger would be prudent to some degree given his quasi-innate but yet unactualized disposition to prudence (arising from the duplicated disposition of Socrates). In either case, prudence is still measured diachronically.

What is the conscience? Descriptions of the conscience and its inner workings abound in, among other places, literature and theology. At one time, philosophers were also interested in writing about the conscience.²⁷ For present purposes, we can understand the conscience to be that cognitive faculty from which moral seemings arise. Two qualifications to that definition are important. First, it is plausible to think the conscience does more than merely produce seemings about moral propositions. Yet, its effect in producing moral seemings is central to moral epistemology and is what I will focus on developing here. Among its other well-recognized effects, a “guilty” conscience appears to produce feelings of psychological discomfort at one’s bad actions, which can be useful in helping one resolve to avoid those actions in the future (and perhaps make restitution for one’s bad actions in the past). Second, it seems entirely plausible that the conscience has a close relationship with other faculties, such as the faculty often called “practical reason,” through which one reasons about action. Hence, it might be that the

Given this account, one might naturally wonder what one’s actions have to do with moral knowledge. It is plausible to think that one’s actions affect one’s desires or appetites, which in turn affect one’s seemings about the things relevant to those desires and appetites. Thus, for instance, a person who actually eats too much is likely to see gustatory and sense pleasures in a magnified way, so that they seem better than they objectively are. When one acts prudently, one’s appetites and desire are shaped in the right ways and have a positive and not distorting effect on one’s seemings.

²⁷ Douglas Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); William Norris Clarke, S.J., *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Thomistic Philosophy, New and Old* (Bronx NY: Fordham University Press, 2009), chap. 8.

conscience is not a *distinct* faculty, whose proper function is independent of the proper function of other cognitive faculties. This was at least the way that Scholastic and Neo-Scholastic philosophers appear to have understood the conscience.²⁸ Some psychological researchers have alternatively advanced the thesis that a distinct mental module generates moral seemings.²⁹ Working out precisely what the conscience consists in is the work of another project. Claims

²⁸ Michael Cronin, *The Science of Ethics*, 3rd edn, 2 vols. (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, Ltd., 1930), vol. I, pp. 472–505; Douglas Langston, “Medieval Theories of Conscience” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011): <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/conscience-medieval/>.

²⁹ Among others, see Susan Dwyer, “Moral Competence” in Kumiko Murasugi and Robert Stainton, eds., *Philosophy and Linguistics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 169–90; Susan Dwyer, “How Not to Argue That Morality Isn’t Innate: Comments on Prinz” in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Moral Psychology: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), vol. I, 407–18; Susan Dwyer, “Moral Dumbfounding and the Linguistic Analogy: Methodological Implications for the Study of Moral Judgment,” *Mind & Language* 24 (2009): 274–96; Susan Dwyer and Marc D. Hauser, “Dupoux and Jacob’s Moral Instincts: Throwing Out the Baby, the Bathwater and the Bathtub,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12 (2008): 1–2; Susan Dwyer, Bryce Huebner and Marc D. Hauser, “The Linguistic Analogy: Motivations, Results, and Speculations,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (2009): 486–510; Marc D. Hauser and L. Young, “Modules, Minds and Morality” in Donald W. Pfaff, Claude Kordon and Philippe Chanson, eds., *Hormones and Social Behavior* (New York NY: Springer, 2008), pp. 1–11; Bryce Huebner, James J. Lee and Marc D. Hauser, “The Moral-Conventional Distinction in Mature Moral Competence,” *Journal of Cognition & Culture* 10 (2010): 1–26.

about the nature of the conscience's various functions and its relation to other faculties are consistent with PCV insofar as those claims do not involve denying that the proper function of the conscience depends upon an agent's level of prudence and the conscience gives rise to moral seemings.

Must a person know that she is prudent in order to be prudent, by PCV? Yes and no. Knowledge of one's own prudence level is not directly introspectively accessible. However, one has a moral duty to be prudent, and one's prudence level depends at least partially upon one's satisfactory fulfillment of duties. Hence, to be prudent one must make a conscious effort and do all that is within one's power to acquire the virtue. Often, that will involve consciously reflecting upon certain norms of prudence and the degree to which one has satisfactorily satisfied them (so that one can determine how and whether more ought to be done), and this normal part of acquiring the virtue will give one some degree of knowledge about one's prudence level. Thus, to be prudent one will ordinarily have acquired some justified beliefs about one's prudence level. However, these justified beliefs are not necessary for the proper function of the conscience, per PCV. Thus, one might suffer from a form of amnesia whereby one forgets how prudent one is, without one's actual prudence level being much affected. In a case like that, the conscience will still function with approximately the same degree of propriety, and confer approximately the same degree of justification.³⁰

³⁰ The degree of justification-conferring power of the conscience in the state described above would, strictly speaking, be slightly lessened because one part of prudence is a good memory Aquinas, *op. cit.*, II-II Q.49, a.1, and in the aforementioned case the person's memory is not functioning properly.

Now that I have explained prudence and the conscience, I will provide two positive arguments for PCV's superiority over SMI. First, I will argue that PCV makes better sense than SMI of cases like MATURITY, ENTHUSIASM, and DISAGREEMENT. Second, I will argue that PCV makes sense of an expanded set of phenomena fundamental to moral knowledge acquisition that advocates of SMI have thus far seemed to disregard.

In the case of MATURITY, Dominic experiences two conflicting seemings, one seeming he experienced when he was morally immature, and one seeming he experiences after he grew more mature. According to SMI, both seemings confer equal degrees of justification because their phenomenal credentials are the same, but that's implausible. According to PCV, the seemings do not confer equal degrees of justification. For Dominic's conscience when he was immature was not functioning as properly as when he matured; the characteristics of moral maturity are, after all, constitutive of prudence, and the proper etiology of a moral seeming partially determines its justification-conferring power. MATURITY is a simple case for PCV.

In ENTHUSIASM, Patricia comes to change her mind about a moral matter in the course of a conversation, and experiences a strong seeming about the truth of the moral proposition that she has been persuaded about, even though the friends who advocated for the truth of this proposition do not experience seemings as strongly as she does. The reason for the disparity seems to be that Patricia has an enthusiastic disposition because of which propositions often don't merely seem true or false, but often seem *strongly* true or *strongly* false. According to SMI, Patricia's enthusiasm gives her an epistemological advantage, namely, her characteristically stronger seemings confer greater justification for her than the seemings of her non-enthusiastic counterparts. Yet, that analysis is implausible. In contrast, PCV can make plausible sense of this case. Having an "enthusiastic" personality, at least in the sense relevant to Patricia, is indicative

of an emotional excess that ought to be tempered by the cultivation of the relevant virtues (e.g., temperance).³¹ The fact that her emotions are excessive in ENTHUSIASM suggests the relevant virtues had not yet been cultivated at the time she experienced her strong seeming; but, for Aquinas, prudence cannot be had independently of the other virtues.³² Thus, her emotional excess is strong evidence of some degree of imprudence.

The precise details of each person's character in ENTHUSIASM would be necessary for a complete determination, but all other things being equal, Patricia's friends have at least as much justification conferred from their respective weaker seemings than Patricia has from her stronger seeming. Patricia's enthusiasm is indicative of (at least) a slightly less prudent character than her non-enthusiastic counterparts, and the final determination of a seeming's justification-conferring power for PCV is an agent's prudence level, not its phenomenal credentials. Aquinas also links the emotional excess characteristic of this sort of passionate personality with one of the types of imprudence, namely, "precipitation," whereby an agent rushes through rational deliberation and judges hastily.³³ Assuming Aquinas is right in linking this personality type with precipitation, PCV has additional resources for diagnosing the problem in cases like these without suggesting, as SMI does, that personalities like Patricia's provide characteristic epistemological advantages.

³¹ cf. Aquinas, *op. cit.*, I-II Q.59, a.5. One might use "enthusiastic" to describe a person who is excited about something in particular, rather than someone who is generally "excitable," such as Patricia here. This alternative sense of "enthusiastic" does not itself indicate imprudence, since the thing about which the person is excited may deserve the level of enthusiasm had by the agent.

³² *Ibid.*, I-II Q.65, a.1, II-II Q.47, a.15.

³³ *Ibid.*, II-II Q.53, a.3.

The final case to consider is DISAGREEMENT. If the epistemic value of a moral seeming were based upon its phenomenal credentials, as SMI suggests, then it's hard to see how to adjudicate moral disagreements wherein both agents have equally good phenomenal support. Cases like DISAGREEMENT are thus often pressed against advocates of SMI as a chief reason not to endorse the view.³⁴ By adding that an agent's level of prudence is a central part of the justification of his basic moral beliefs, PCV can plausibly deny that disputed beliefs with equally good phenomenal credentials are in fact equally well supported. The epistemic support of disputed beliefs also depends upon the virtuous character of the agents party to the dispute, and unlike the phenomenal credentials of seemings, the moral character of agents seems to differ widely. In DISAGREEMENT, for instance, it is highly plausible to think that Dr. Gustoff is seriously malformed in his moral judgments and in his deliberations about those that are poor, weak, and ugly. Consequently, even though Dr. Gustoff's seeming about the poor, weak, and ugly is equally well-supported by its phenomenal credentials as Dr. Ferguson's rival seeming that the poor, weak, and ugly should be treated with nobility, Dr. Gustoff's belief is not as equally well-supported as Dr. Ferguson's belief *tout court*. For Dr. Ferguson is more prudent and thus has greater justification for his rival belief. Hence, if anyone has a defeater in DISAGREEMENT, it is Dr. Gustoff alone.

PCV has resources to go further. Dr. Gustoff's disagreement with Dr. Ferguson is not ultimately epistemically disadvantageous for Dr. Gustoff, despite the defeater that is plausibly thought to arise against his disputed belief from disagreement with his more prudent colleague. Why not? In the circumstances, it would be prudent for Dr. Gustoff to defer to Dr. Ferguson's belief that it is good to treat the poor, weak, and ugly with nobility. By PCV, that norm of

³⁴ Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, pp. 128, 141–143.

prudence implies that Dr. Ferguson's belief has some propositional justification for Dr. Gustoff because of Dr. Ferguson's apparently more prudent character, as well as his testimony to Dr. Gustoff that the propositional contents of this disputed belief seem true to him.³⁵

Now that I have explained how PCV makes better sense of cases like MATURITY, ENTHUSIASM, and DISAGREEMENT, I will explain how PCV is naturally oriented toward a more complete understanding of the phenomenology of moral knowledge acquisition. Although advocates of SMI have provided some descriptions of the phenomenology of seemings, their descriptions are ordinarily oriented toward the phenomenology of self-evidence.³⁶ Rarely will one find an account of SMI that provides comprehensive detail regarding the experiences attendant upon moral belief formation. For instance, Butler once remarked "Had [the conscience] strength as it has right, had it power as it has manifest authority, it would absolutely govern the world."³⁷ Cardinal Newman thought of the conscience as being a sort of reverberation or echo of God's voice.³⁸ It's hard to know what advocates of SMI would make of claims like these, yet the descriptions are evidently about what at least some moral seemings are like.

³⁵ Regarding propositional justification, cf. Roderick Firth, "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts?," in Alvin Goldman and Jaegwon Kim, eds., *Values and Morals: Essays in Honour of William Frankena, Charles Stevenson and Richard Brandt* (Hingham, MA: Springer, 1978), pp. 215–29.

³⁶ cf. Matthew Bedke, "Intuitionist Epistemology in Ethics," *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 1069–1083.

³⁷ Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London UK: W. Botham, 1726), p. 42.

³⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York NY: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), pp. 97–116.

Experiential reports like these need not be taken as so mystical as to be beyond the purview of competent philosophical analysis. By focusing on the justification-conferring power a properly functioning conscience provides, PCV is open to (and has the resources to make sense of) a wide range of phenomenological descriptions of moral knowledge acquisition. With Butler and Newman's claims about the conscience in mind, for instance, we might say that some moral seemings have a phenomenal feature of "lucency," the characteristics of which cannot be neatly relegated to more conventional phenomenal categories of strength and weakness. Instead, a proposition supported by lucent seeming appears true, clearly and unshakably, as if attested to by a divine "voice" internal to the agent. Hence, often the conscience is described as a "still small voice" that "speaks" in a way that, despite being occasionally weak in its vivacity (i.e., being "still" and "small"), is nevertheless recognizably best to the agent. Lucent seemings would thus appear capable of defeating other, conflicting, and perhaps phenomenologically more vivid (or "strong"), seemings. PCV adds that the conscience is also capable of producing non-lucent seemings, though lucent phenomenological credentials appear capable of conferring more justification than their non-lucent counterparts.

In principle, there is no reason why SMI cannot accommodate claims about, say, lucency. However, since PCV sees the conscience as contributing an important etiological foundation to this unique phenomenology, it is naturally interested in the full range of phenomenological outputs of the conscience and not merely interested in a narrow range of seemings capable of stopping epistemic regress. Moreover, focusing on the causal origins of these phenomenological outputs allows PCV a simple and cohesive account of their justification-conferring power.

CONCLUSION.

Moral intuitionism has become an increasingly popular account in moral epistemology, but defenses of it have become dominated by advocates of the standard account. The main disadvantage to the standard account is that it does not take etiology seriously, and there are a range of cases in which etiology clearly matters for the degree of justification conferred upon a moral belief. In this paper, I have advocated a non-standard account of moral intuitionism called the Prudent Conscience View, according to which proper etiology does matter. In particular, the justification of a moral belief depends upon the proper function of the conscience, and the proper function of the conscience is proportionate to the degree of prudence possessed by an agent. By taking etiology seriously, the prudent conscience view provides several distinct advantages over the standard account and should thus be considered the more plausible sort of intuitionism.³⁹

³⁹ I'd like to particularly thank Patrick Kain, Michael Bergmann, Terence Cuneo, and Dan Baras for their useful advice and suggestions, as well as the audience at a 2012 graduate ethics conference at Fordham University.