

Phenomenology, Moral

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In the philosophy of mind, the study of mental life has tended to focus on three central aspects of mental states: their representational content, their functional role, and their phenomenal character. The representational content of a mental state is what the state represents, what it is about; its functional role is the role it plays within the functional organization of the subject's overall psychology; its phenomenal character is the experiential or subjective quality that goes with what it is like, from the inside, to be in it. The study of this third aspect of mental life is known as *phenomenology*. Thus, moral phenomenology is the study of the experiential dimension of our moral inner life – of the phenomenal character of moral mental states.

(The term “moral phenomenology” is sometimes used to denote a subject and sometimes to denote a subject matter. Here, I will reserve it for the subject, and use “moral experience” to denote the subject matter. Under this terminological regime, moral phenomenology is the dedicated study of moral experience.)

Many different questions arise within moral phenomenology, but perhaps they can be profitably organized into three types of question. The first concerns the *scope* of moral experience: How much of our moral mental life is experiential? That is, which moral mental states have a phenomenal character? The second concerns the *nature* of moral experience: What *is* it like to undergo the various kinds of moral experience we have? That is, what is the proper phenomenological analysis of each type of moral experience? The third concerns the theoretical *effect* of moral experience: How might our understanding of moral experience impact central debates in moral philosophy? That is, what are the consequences of phenomenological “results” on larger ethical and metaethical questions? We will now consider each of these types of question.

In considering the scope of moral experience, the least controversial varieties will involve areas of mental life that both are uncontroversially moral and clearly have an experiential dimension. Moral emotions (*see* EMOTION) are a case in point: the feeling of indignation at a certain injustice is clearly a moral mental state and has a characteristic phenomenal character. The same holds for certain varieties of respect, compassion, gratitude, contempt, (out)rage, guilt, and other moral emotions. Likewise, there are certain agentive or conative mental states that clearly appear both moral and experiential – conscious moral desire (*see* DESIRE), moral intention (*see* INTENTION), and moral decision come to mind.

More controversial forms of moral experience are moral perception (*see* PERCEPTION, MORAL) and moral judgment or belief. They are controversial for different reasons: it is clear that perception has a phenomenal character, but controversial that any perception is genuinely moral; by contrast, it is clear that some

judgments/beliefs are genuinely moral, but less clear that any judgments or beliefs have a phenomenal character. Thus, admitting the existence of these kinds of moral experience involves certain substantive commitments. Sensibility theorists (McDowell 1979; *see* SENSIBILITY THEORY), for example, will argue that there is a kind of perception which is genuinely moral, and therefore that some moral experience is perceptual. Some proponents of cognitive phenomenology (Strawson 1994; Pitt 2004) – philosophers who argue that purely cognitive mental states do sometimes exhibit a proprietary type of phenomenal character – could argue that moral judgments/beliefs have a distinctive phenomenal character, and therefore qualify as a type of moral experience.

An expansive moral phenomenology would admit not only moral emotion and agency, but also moral perception and cognition (judgments/beliefs), and perhaps even more (e.g., *sui generis* moral intuition), as forms of moral experience. A more timid moral phenomenology would accept only moral emotion and agency, or perhaps even less (e.g., denying moral agency is experiential), as genuine moral experience. How the question of the scope of moral experience is settled will depend partly on empirical results of the appropriate inquiry, but also on conceptual and methodological issues concerning what it takes for something to qualify as “experiential” or “phenomenal,” and how we ought to cull and analyze phenomenological data.

Let us move on, then, to the question of the *nature* of moral experience. Here, the phenomenological investigation can be pursued at two levels, global and local. At a *global* level, there are questions concerning the extrinsic relations that episodes of moral experience bear to each other and to nonexperiential mental states: (i) how much of our stream of consciousness is taken up by moral experience, (ii) how much of our moral experience is emotional, how much cognitive, or how much perceptual, (iii) what kinds of patterns of interaction can be found between moral and nonmoral experiential episodes, etc. At a *local* level, there are questions concerning the internal phenomenal character and structure of specific episodes of moral experience: (i) whether there is a phenomenal feature which is common and peculiar to moral experiences, and which can thus serve as the “phenomenal signature” of moral experience, (ii) whether the phenomenal character of prototypical episodes of moral experience is more cognitive or more conative in nature, (iii) whether any moral experiences phenomenally present themselves as having objective pretensions, etc. These local questions, as I have called them, are the questions that moral phenomenologists have tended to focus on, and so will I.

One of the earliest modern dedicated discussion of the phenomenal character of moral experience is in Maurice Mandelbaum’s (1955) book *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (*see* Horgan and Timmons 2008a, 2008b). According to Mandelbaum, the prototypical moral experience is that of a “direct moral judgment,” where one is confronted with a morally pregnant situation calling on one to react. Such experiences, claims Mandelbaum, involve a phenomenal character of *felt demand*. Mandelbaum describes this phenomenal character as a sort of force, which like every force has a source and a direction: the source is always experienced as external to us, and the direction always as pointed at us.

Mandelbaum's analysis casts the phenomenal character of moral experience as having a straightforward objectivist purport. According to Horgan and Timmons (2008b), however, things are a little subtler than this. They suggest that moral experience has an objective purport only in a limited sense. It has objective purport inasmuch as it has a belief-ish phenomenal character, and moreover phenomenally presents itself as impartial, nonarbitrary, and reason-based. However, it does not necessarily present itself phenomenally as answerable to external, mind-independent facts, and to that extent it does not have a more robust objectivist or realist purport. In a different vein, Loeb (2007) argues that while the phenomenal character of *some* moral experiences has an objective purport, that of others does not, and so it is not a constitutive or universal feature of moral experience that it has objective purport in this way.

In other places, Horgan and Timmons (2007) make a similar claim by saying that the phenomenal character of moral experience is *cognitive* but not *descriptive*. What makes it cognitive is the fact that it exhibits, according to them, the phenomenal hallmarks of belief, of which they suggest five: (i) involving a feeling as of "coming down" on an issue, where (ii) there is an application of a sortal, or a categorization of objects, in a manner that is experienced (iii) as involuntary, (iv) as rationally imposed by reasons, and (v) as lending itself to verbal expression through a declarative sentence. This fivefold character of moral experience does not involve, however, presenting the experience as attempting to "get right" mind-independent moral *facts*, which is what a descriptive phenomenal character would involve. In fact, whether the phenomenal character of moral experience is descriptive in this way is probably not introspectively accessible to us, claim Horgan and Timmons.

Another phenomenal feature of moral experience, sometimes claimed on behalf of moral experiences, is that they involve the feeling of being motivated to act on it – that it is, in this sense, a desire-like state (Kriegel forthcoming; but see Smith 1994 for a contrarian view). This is in line with internalist (*see* INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL), and often non-cognitivist (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM), approaches to moral judgment, but whereas internalism as typically construed concerns the functional role of moral judgments (whether it *actually* inclines the agent to act), the claim here concerns their phenomenal character (whether it *feels* like a motivational state).

Note that many of the claims just surveyed are based on the assumption that moral experiences exhibit certain phenomenal features that are invariable across different contexts. Gill (2008) argues against this, and Sinnott-Armstrong (2008) goes further to argue that moral experiences (and indeed moral mental states in general) have no features that are common and peculiar to them. At the background here are some very pressing methodological questions about how to conduct a phenomenological inquiry (*see* Gill 2008; Horgan and Timmons 2008a; Kriegel 2008) – methodological questions that continue to haunt moral phenomenology, though no more than they haunt other areas of phenomenological investigation.

Let us turn, finally, to the question of the theoretical impact and relevance of moral phenomenology. Here too, it would be useful to distinguish two levels of relevance: to normative ethics and to metaethics. On the one hand, moral phenomenology can importantly inform debates within and among consequentialist (*see* CONSEQUENTIALISM), deontological (*see* DEONTOLOGY), and virtue-ethical (*see* VIRTUE ETHICS) ethical frameworks. On the other hand, it can also inform debates between cognitivism and expressivism, realism (*see* REALISM, MORAL) and anti-realism, etc.

To start, consider that there is a potential central role for moral phenomenology in each of the major (first-order) ethical theories. Thus, in the most straightforward version of consequentialism, the right action is identified with that which maximizes the number of utiles (and/or minimizes the number of disutiles) in the world. However, there are various possible views on the nature of utiles, the units of utility, as can be seen from the disagreement already between Bentham and Mill (*see* MILL, JOHN STUART). In particular, different positive mental states compete as potential utiles. We could enumerate, in order of increasing sophistication and depth, pleasure (*see* PLEASURE), joy, contentment, happiness (*see* HAPPINESS), and fulfillment, but there are probably others. Observe, now, that what makes these mental states “positive” is presumably their phenomenal character. Therefore, they are all open to phenomenological analysis that would attempt to draw out their internal phenomenal structure and character and the phenomenal differences (as well as similarities) among them. The results of such phenomenological analysis can be expected to bear on the question of which mental states we should designate as the ultimate utiles. This illustrates the central relevance of moral phenomenology to one version of consequentialism, and other versions are likely to either inherit the same relevance or be susceptible to a parallel one.

Consider next the first version of deontological ethical theory to come to mind, the categorical-imperative-centered (*see* CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE) Kantian ethics (*see* KANT, IMMANUEL). In its most intuitive formulation – the “humanity formula” – the categorical imperative calls on us to treat humanity, whether ours or others’, always also as an end in itself and never merely as a means to other ends. What this comes to depends on what is involved in treating someone as an end. Note that the formula does not prohibit treating others as means, only treating them as *mere* means, and that this implies that it is possible to treat someone simultaneously as an end and as a means (e.g., in asking someone for the time while being fully and self-consciously respectful [*see* RESPECT] of their rational autonomy [*see* AUTONOMY]). This in turn entails that it is impossible to analyze treating someone as an end purely negatively, in terms of avoiding treating them as a means. Some positive characterization of treating as an end is called for. This positive characterization will likely address both the functional role and the phenomenal character of the mental states of a moral agent who treats someone as an end. More specifically, it is unlikely that the state of treating someone as an end could be fully characterized without any phenomenological remarks on the agent’s experience while treating a patient as an end: it is unlikely that a zombie could be correctly

described as treating someone as an end. (Furthermore, Kant explicitly mentions several duties that appear to involve an experiential dimension, such as the duties to “actively sympathize” with others and to avoid feelings of arrogance, malice, etc.)

Finally, consider the classical form of virtue ethics, as developed in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (see ARISTOTLE). Here, the central maxim can be captured in the principle that we ought to do the right thing “to the right person, at the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way” (1109a27-9). Compare giving a generous handout to a homeless person with contempt versus with compassion in one’s heart. And compare further the generously acting person who *believes* that homeless people are her equal but cannot stop feeling a sense of superiority toward them versus the person who *feels* that homeless people are her equal. The virtuous agent does not only *do* the right thing, and does not only *believe* the right thing, but also *feels* the right way. This raises the question of what the virtuous agent feels – what is the distinctive phenomenal character of what she experiences as she acts generously. Annas (2008) argues that the phenomenology of virtue is the phenomenology of *flow*, where the agent experiences no inner resistance to, and no need for effort in, performing the right action. Other views of the matter are certainly possible, but it is clear that a phenomenological investigation into the character and structure of the experience of virtuous agency ought to be part of the program of virtue ethics.

As for the relevance of moral phenomenology to metaethics, it should be clear from the preceding discussion of the phenomenal nature of moral experience that there are immediate implications for central debates in metaethics and moral psychology.

Consider the debate over moral realism. A traditional argument for realism is that moral experience presents itself as answering to a realm of mind-independent moral facts, and so we would be under massive illusion if there were no such facts. Although some philosophers are willing to bite the bullet and adopt a so-called error theory about our moral experience (Mackie 1977), most consider that this is a price very much worth avoiding. To avoid paying this price, one could argue either (i) that the inference from the character of moral experience to the reality of such moral facts is problematic, or (ii) that moral experience does not in fact present itself as answering to moral facts in the way realists have claimed (Loeb 2007). This latter strategy requires engaging in some moral phenomenology. The result of this engagement thus directly affects the cases for moral realism and irrealism.

Consider next the debate over cognitivism. The central argument for cognitivism is probably that which relies on the Frege–Geach observation (see FREGE–GEACH OBJECTION) that moral judgments have an inferential role characteristic of the cognitive/descriptive (Geach 1960). However, arguably, the intuitive pull of cognitivism owes much to the introspective impression that moral mental states *feel* cognitive, or belief-like (Horgan and Timmons 2007). This is why technical accommodations of the Frege–Geach problem by non-cognitivists (e.g., Gibbard 2003) do not undo the appeal of cognitivism. Thus, it would seem that the battle over the respective merits of cognitivism and non-cognitivism must be fought on at least two fronts: the Frege–Geach problem and the phenomenology of moral experience.

In conclusion, the area of moral phenomenology is of unmistakable relevance to the most central issues of moral philosophy, and is relatively wide open in terms of the number of issues within it that remain underexplored, concerning the scope and nature of various types of moral experiences. Its pursuit has been limited and disparate until very recently, but mostly because of a sense of intractability that attached to phenomenology in general. Yet, in relevant areas of philosophy of mind and cognitive science, this initial sense of intractability has ceased to be paralyzing some time ago. It can therefore be expected with some justification that a parallel development will enhance research in moral phenomenology over the coming years and decades.

See also: ARISTOTLE; AUTONOMY; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; CONSEQUENTIALISM; DEONTOLOGY; DESIRE; EMOTION; FREGE–GEACH OBJECTION; HAPPINESS; INTENTION; INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; KANT, IMMANUEL; MILL, JOHN STUART; NON-COGNITIVISM; PERCEPTION, MORAL; PLEASURE; REALISM, MORAL; RESPECT; SENSIBILITY THEORY; VIRTUE ETHICS

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