

Merleau-Ponty, Moral Perception, and Metaethical Internalism

Two of the most basic commitments of virtue ethics, both ancient and contemporary, are that virtue is knowledge and that this knowledge is a kind of moral sensitivity that is best understood on the model of perception. On this account, the virtuous agent perceives moral goodness and badness in something like the way we perceive that a smiling person is happy or that a raging bull is dangerous. This is opposed to the more widely held view of moral experience, according to which perception informs us only of non-moral states of affairs; the specifically moral content of the experience, on this view, comes either from distinct pro- or con-attitudes toward those states of affairs or from general principles that we apply to them. One important advantage of the virtue ethical account is that it seems to be more faithful to our actual experience than its rival. If I witness my neighbors gratuitously causing severe pain to their cat, for example, I feel as if I perceive the wrongness of their doing so directly. I do not experience myself as *concluding* the wrongness by adding a moral principle—that it is wrong to cause pain gratuitously—to my perception of a morally neutral state of affairs. Nor does it seem that my con-attitude is the source of the moral content of my experience; I would more naturally say the reverse, that I have a con-attitude *because* what I witnessed was morally bad. The virtue ethical account also seems to make better sense of how we frequently deal with moral disagreement: instead of trying to manipulate people's feelings or reasoning with

them from first principles, we often try to get them to recognize some feature of the situation as having a salience that we think they had not adequately perceived.¹

But this account is also vulnerable to some potentially very serious objections. Two of these concern virtue ethics' commitment to metaethical internalism, which is the view that sincere judgments of the form "x is right (or obligatory or called for by the circumstances of the case, etc.)" entail some kind of motivation to do x. It is the view, in other words, that motivation is internal to moral evaluation. One reason this view has been regarded as problematic is that it posits the existence of a Janus-faced mental state that is at once a belief and a desire.² According to the objection, there can be no such mental state, since beliefs and desires have incompatible directions of fit: we modify our beliefs to fit the world, whereas we modify the world to fit our desires.³ The second objection suggests that virtue ethics is unable to account for the fact that moral evaluation and motivation frequently do come apart: we *see* the moral importance, for example, of calling our senators to express our views about the rights of immigrants, but we don't always feel motivated to actually make the call. If virtue really is knowledge, then it seems that this sort of thing ought not to happen.

My goal in this paper will be to show that we can find the resources to respond adequately to these objections in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. In what follows, I will address the two objections in turn. In response to the first ob-

¹ John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 340

² Michael Smith, "Evaluation, Uncertainty and Motivation," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5, no. 3 (2002): 305.

³ Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 118–125.

jection, I will argue that motivation is internal to evaluation because the moral sense of a situation is given only as correlative to a particular manner of “gearing in” to that situation. To be geared in in the right way is to experience the situation itself as motivating an appropriate response. And in response to the second objection, I will argue that moral evaluation and motivation can come apart because we sometimes find ourselves in the grip of incompatible moral gestalts.⁴

Given that the problems I want to address stem from virtue ethics’ commitment to metaethical internalism, it will be best to begin directly with Merleau-Ponty’s account of motivation. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty characterizes motivation as a relationship in which “one phenomenon triggers another, not through some objective causality, such as the one linking together the events of nature, but rather through the sense it offers.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty gives an example of this kind of relationship that is especially helpful for our examination of moral perception: for a journey to be motivated, it must have “its origin in certain given facts,” but in such a way that these facts are not understood as *causing* the journey. If someone were to seize me by force and transport me to a different location, for example, he would not motivate my journey; he would cause it. By contrast, a fact that could motivate a journey would be that a friend in another city has died. In this case, the motive “only acts through its sense:” I recognize the facts as calling

⁴ For other accounts of the relation between Merleau-Ponty and broadly Aristotelian virtue ethics, see Kym Maclaren, “Merleau-Ponty’s Embodied Ethics: Rethinking Traditional Ethics” in Christine Daigle, ed., *Existential Thinkers and Ethics* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 142–166; Glen A. Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 101–103.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 122–123. Hereafter Ph.P.

for me to attend the funeral, perhaps to “comfort a grieving family or to pay my ‘final respects.’”⁶

As I have described it so far, motivated action looks very much like action that is responsive to reasons. And this is indeed what Merleau-Ponty suggests: the relevant facts do not motivate because “they have the physical power to produce the journey, but insofar as they offer reasons for undertaking it.”⁷ It is important to keep in mind, though, that this equation of motivated action with reason-responsive action is potentially misleading.⁸ To say that I act for a reason is at least to suggest that I explicitly posit some consideration as counting in favor of some action. If something I want to purchase becomes available at a deep discount, for example, I might take that as a reason to make the purchase. But many cases of motivated action are not like this. If a person I am conversing with is standing closer to me than I am comfortable with, I will feel motivated to move back. In most cases, I would not take the person’s proximity as a *reason* to move because I would not explicitly thematize the proximity at all. Rather, the person’s proximity is given to me directly as a solicitation to move back.

But how is this supposed to work? How can the sense of a situation be given directly as a motivation? If we cannot give an adequate account of this, then we will have some reason to adopt the more widely accepted view, which is that I perceive the sadness of my friend’s family and then bring the case under a moral principle that I am already

⁶ Ibid., 313–314.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. Donnchadh O’Conaill, “The Space of Motivations,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22, no. 3 (2014): 440–455.

committed to, so that my motivation to make the journey comes from my commitment to the principle and not directly from my apprehension of the sense of the case. On Merleau-Ponty's account, the sense of a situation can be given as directly motivating because it is correlative to an orientation that is practical through and through. An example of this point can be seen in the apparently very simple case of perceiving a color correctly as blue. To do so, it is not enough merely to open my eyes and turn them toward the blue object. Rather, "a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that *will* provide it with the means to become determinate and to become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question."⁹ The blue, in other words, is not given most originally as a fully determinate color, but rather as a solicitation to my body to orient itself toward it in the way necessary to make it appear determinately as blue. The same point also applies to perception on a larger scale: "for each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen—an orientation through which it presents more of itself. . . ."¹⁰ As in the case of color perception, the sense of the painting is given only as correlative to the bodily orientation that it motivates.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes frequent use of the expression "gearing in" to describe what happens when we successfully adopt the orientation toward things that is necessary to bring out their sense. There are two features of gear mechanisms that seem especially relevant for the analogy that Merleau-Ponty is suggest-

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Ph.P, 222.

¹⁰ Ibid., 315–316.

ing here. First, they can only do their work when the teeth of at least two cogwheels mesh together. In real gears, of course, the cogwheels are made for each other. And this is also true, at least to a certain extent, of the relationship between perceiver and perceived. I am able to respond appropriately to the solicitation of the nascently given blue because at a level prior to conscious reflection, my perceiving body “has already sided with the world” and “is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them.”¹¹ We should be careful, though, not to take this aspect of the analogy too literally. As Donald Landes helpfully points out in a footnote to his translation of *Phenomenology of Perception*, gearing in as Merleau-Ponty understands it is something that must be accomplished; the fit is not guaranteed in advance.¹² As a result, the process of gearing in can fail in a way that it rarely does in the literal case. The second relevant feature of gear mechanisms is that one cogwheel transfers motion to another. Once I am geared into some aspect of the world, the world itself does much of the work of drawing me in, giving me an orientation and revealing further practical possibilities. This is what happens, for example, when I am geared into an improvisation with other musicians: I do not need to generate my part of the musical sense from scratch because the music itself helps to carry me forward. The same sort of thing happens when I am geared into a movie, a novel, a conversation, or a philosophy paper.

Most importantly for present purposes, this is also what happens when I am geared into the moral sense of a situation. Let me illustrate the point with a relatively

¹¹ Ibid., 224.

¹² Ibid., 496, n. 47.

mundane example: in the building where I teach most of my courses, there are three classrooms that are very difficult for students to find because they are not located where their room numbers suggest they should be. On the first day of each semester, I always see students anxiously searching for those classrooms, fearing that they will be dropped from their classes for non-attendance. Typically, this scene is gestalted for me in such a way that the students' anxiety is in the foreground. When I am geared in in that way, the sense of the situation itself motivates me to help the students find their classrooms. Of course there is no guarantee that I will gear into the situation in that way: I might completely fail to notice the anxiety on the students' faces, for example, or I might notice it but foreground something else instead, such as my own lateness for class. But if I am geared in in such a way that the students' anxiety is foregrounded, then my motivation to help them is internal to my perception of the sense of the situation. The perception and the motivation, in other words, are not distinct mental states. This is possible, as we have seen, because perception-as is inseparable from gearing in, which is an irreducibly practical orientation toward the sense of the world.

This, I hope, provides a satisfactory response to the first objection to the thesis that virtue is knowledge and that this knowledge is based on a kind of moral perception. But it does so in a way that seems to cut off the possibility of a satisfactory response to the second objection, which is simply that moral evaluation and motivation frequently do come apart. It would be hard to deny that we sometimes perceive states of affairs as calling for particular responses, but without actually feeling the appropriate motivation, or at least without feeling it sufficiently. If it is true that moral perception is inseparable from a

successful gearing in to the sense of a situation, then it seems that this should not happen. One way to get out of this difficulty would be to argue that if a person is not motivated by her perception of the moral sense of the situation, then she does not “really” perceive the sense at all. But this move is too easy, as it would make the virtue ethicist’s thesis true by definition. It would also make it difficult to understand how we could experience the gap between our sense of the situation and our motivation. Simply put, if we did not perceive the sense, then we would not perceive the gap. A second possible response would be to point out that we often lack the appropriate motivation simply because we are tired, ill, in great pain, depressed, distracted, etc.¹³ This fact is compatible with the internalism, since a reasonable construal of that view does not require that our motivations correspond to our evaluations in literally every case.¹⁴ But this response does not take the problem seriously enough. The real problem cases for internalism are those in which we lack the right motivations even when we are not suffering from these sorts of overpowering conditions. How can the Merleau-Pontian account of moral perception that I am arguing for here make sense of these sorts of failures?

I believe the first clue toward solving this problem can be found in a distinction that Allan Gibbard makes in his book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* between accepting a norm and being in the grip of a norm.¹⁵ This distinction helps to explain why participants in Stanley Milgram’s famous experiment were willing to administer increasingly painful,

¹³ Cf. Michael Stocker, “Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 76, no. 12 (1979): 744.

¹⁴ Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 61.

¹⁵ Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 58–61.

and even potentially lethal, shocks to subjects who answered questions incorrectly. Most of us who read about the experiment are very confident that we would not have continued to administer the shocks once we realized that we were causing great pain. And the reason for our confidence is simple: we accept the norm of non-maleficence, which requires us not to inflict harm without good cause. But of course the experimental subjects accepted this norm as well, as evidenced by the distress they felt when they obeyed the experimenter's commands to administer the increasingly severe shocks. The reason the subjects administered the shocks was because in that very specific context they found themselves in the grip of a competing norm: to comply with the demands of the person in charge of the experiment. As outsiders reading about the experiment, we are not in the grip of that norm at all, and so it seems obvious to us that we would have acted on the norm of non-maleficence.

To apply Gibbard's insight to the Merleau-Pontian account I am arguing for here, we could say that we sometimes find ourselves in the grip of competing moral *gestalts*. To be in the grip of a gestalt just is to be geared into the sense of a situation in a particular way. The close relation between Gibbard's idea of being in the grip and Merleau-Ponty's idea of gearing in is strongly suggested by the original French text of *Phenomenology of Perception*: two of the expressions that Landes translates as "geared into" are "*en prise sur*" and "*en prise avec*."¹⁶ One of the idiomatic senses of *en prise* is "in gear," but *la*

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Ph.P, 260, 263, 349, 356, 375, 401.

prise also has the sense of a hold or a grip.¹⁷ A gestalted situation, then, has a grip on us in something very roughly like the way a driver gear has a grip on a driven gear.

In order for this idea to work as an account of how our moral perceptions can fail sufficiently to motivate, it must be possible for situations to be gestalted in more than one way. And this is exactly what Merleau-Ponty believes. When I see a cube drawn on a piece of paper, for example, I typically alternate between perceiving it “from above” and “from the side.” Even if I have drawn the cube myself and even if I am fully aware of its geometrical properties, which represent a kind of view from nowhere, I always see it from somewhere. And that “somewhere” is unstable.¹⁸ Moral situations are frequently ambiguous in just this way. Most of us gear into the moral sense of the situation presented in the Milgram studies in a way that foregrounds the suffering of the subjects who received the electric shocks; this way of perceiving would typically bring with it a strong motivation to reduce or prevent that suffering. But as the studies showed, the same situation can be gestalted in such a way that the suffering caused by administering the shocks is in the background, with respect for the authority of the experimenter taking its place in the foreground. When this gestalt switch happens, the participants do not all of a sudden become oblivious to the moral importance of others’ suffering. They still perceive that administering the shocks is morally problematic even when that aspect of the scene is no longer experienced as the most salient. They administer the shocks anyway because they

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 516, n. 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

are in the grip of a gestalt that motivates compliance more than it motivates non-maleficence.

With this I hope to have presented at least the broad outlines of an adequate Merleau-Pontian response to two of the most pressing objections to virtue ethics, and to the idea of moral perception in particular. Both of these objections called into question the kind of metaethical internalism that is required by the thesis that virtue is knowledge. If Merleau-Ponty is correct that the moral sense of a situation is correlative to a particular manner of gearing into it, and if he is correct that situations can be gestalted in more than one way, then we have good reason to believe that motivation can be internal to our evaluations.