

Perceiving Grounded Moral Properties

Hamid Nourbakhshi

Psychological Sciences Department, University of Missouri-Columbia, MO, USA

Philosophy Department, University of Missouri-Columbia, MO, USA

Email address:

Hnth5@missouri.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-6893-3451

Abstract: The advocates of moral perception claim that we can literally perceive moral properties such as goodness and badness. One of the objections to the thesis of moral perception is that since we are not able to causally interact with moral properties and these properties are causally inert, thus they do not fall into the scope of our perception. In reply, the advocates propose different solutions: 1) moral properties supervene on natural properties, 2) moral properties are secondary natural properties, and 3) moral properties are non-secondary natural properties. Each of these proposals aims to attack a different premise of the objection. In this paper, I am going to propose the thesis that assuming that moral properties are grounded in natural properties, Wilsonian grounding can be a new reply to this objection. I will try to explain how Alastair Wilson's account of grounding in addition to a grounding thesis about the relation between moral and natural properties can prevent accident without setting moral properties aside from perceptual scope.

Keywords: Grounding, Metaphysical causation, Nomological causation, Moral perception.

1. Introduction

Moral Perception

Moral perception (MP) is the thesis that we can literally perceive moral properties. For instance, if you perceive that some hoodlums are pouring gasoline on a cat to ignite it, assuming that you are a normal perceiver, badness would be a part of your perceptual content (Werner, 2016). Note that: a) The advocates of moral perception commonly believe that MP does not entail that we can perceive all moral properties. In other words, they state MP as an existential thesis that holds that we can perceive just some moral properties. To put it in intentional vocabulary, some of our perceptual experiences have intentional contents that represent moral properties. B) MP is not a thesis in favor of moral realism. MP takes moral realism for granted. So, MP is not to prove that there are moral properties outside there. Instead, MP is an account of how we access the existing moral properties. MP wants to show that firstly, moral knowledge -in general- is possible, and secondly, it proposes an empirical account of moral knowledge -in particular- as a possible way of accessing the existing moral properties. In this paper, I try to defend a more restricted version of moral perception:

Moral Perception (MP): Some intrinsic moral properties are perceivable.

Intrinsic vs Extrinsic

By intrinsic property I mean a property that an object has regardless of its relations to the other objects. Intrinsic properties are non-relational properties like the mass of an object which is independent of its relation to other things. By extrinsic property I mean a property that an object has regarding its relations to other object(s). Extrinsic properties are relational properties like the weight of an object which is determined by its relation to the source of gravity.

Here I take moral properties like the badness of igniting a cat as intrinsic properties of a moral situation and moral properties like ownership as extrinsic properties. Some advocates of moral perception might claim that provided relevant information and knowledge about the moral situation; we may be able to perceive some extrinsic moral properties as well as intrinsic moral properties. In this paper, for the sake of argumentation and avoiding some objections, I am not going to broaden the scope of MP to include extrinsic properties.

Even though MP seems interesting, there are some objections raised toward this project. One of the main objections is the causal objection.

2. Causal Objection

Causal objection (CO) is about the causal force of moral properties. By taking an inductive look, one would see that in most of the ordinary perceptual experiences, there is a causal relation between the perceiver (S) and the perceived property/properties. But induction is not the only reason why one may think perception involves causation. The main

motivation to think of appropriate causal contact as a necessary condition for perception is preventing accidentality. Causality seems to be the most effective criterion to rule out Gettier's perceptual cases out of knowledge productive cases of perception. In this case, even though there is a cat outside there which coincides with my perceptual experience of the holographic cat, still I don't know that there is a cat outside there. Because I am not in causal contact with that cat, let alone it be an appropriate causal contact. Here is a reconstruction of CO:

- I. S perceives O only if her perception is not a mere accident.
- II. S's perception is not a mere accident only if she is appropriately connected to O.
- III. The only appropriate connection to O is the nomological causal connection.
- IV. Therefore, S perceives O only if she is causally connected to O.
- V. There is not a nomological causal connection between S and moral properties.
- VI. Therefore, S does not perceive moral properties.

Replies

McBrayer (2010a) introduces the perception of supervened properties as a case in which supervenience is preventing accidentality. McBrayer believes that supervenience while preventing accidentence can explain the relation of moral and natural properties, and thus overcome the causal objection. A reconstruction of this idea can be deductively represented as the following:

- a) If supervenience can prevent mere accidental perceptions, then supervenience is an appropriate connection for perception.
- b) Supervenience can prevent mere accidents.
- c) TF, Supervenience is an appropriate connection for preventing mere accidents.

The second option to reply to CO is to argue that moral properties are secondary natural properties. McDowell (1998, p113) takes secondary properties as properties that depend on the subjective character of our perceptual experience. The paradigm case for such a property is color. Although colors are the products of physical features of the environment, we don't understand colors in that way. Instead, colors are understood in terms of subjective experience. Secondary qualities as we perceive them are regarded as qualities that are causally inert but still have a robust connection to our perception and thus are perceptible. So, if we can perceive secondary properties and if secondary properties are not causally efficacious, then a causal connection is not necessary for the perception of secondary properties. Therefore, premise III of CO is false.

The third option is appealing to non-secondary natural properties (NSNP). This account holds that moral properties are reduceable or identical to non-secondary natural properties.

Non-secondary natural properties are properties that can be studied in science or can be reduced to properties that are apt to be studied in science. The natural kind of Being a cat and my being a human both can be reduced to the natural properties of a cat and me that can be studied in science. The proponent of NSNP holds that moral properties are NSNPs. In other words, Moral properties are identical or reduceable to natural properties. However, this account does not deny that causal connection is a necessary condition for perception, it denies that moral properties are causally inert. This is to say that it accepts premise III but rejects premise V. So, if moral properties are identical or reduceable to natural properties and natural properties are causally efficacious, then moral properties are causally efficacious.

In the following, I will try to give a new reply to CO by appealing to the Wilsonian notion of grounding. I argue that Alastair Wilson's account of grounding relations can prevent accidentence.

3. Grounding as Metaphysical Causation

There are different accounts of grounding in the literature. Some of the grounding philosophers explicate grounding in causal terms (Schaffer, 2012 & 2016. Fine 2012). Wilson (2017) argues that grounding is a type of causation: metaphysical causation. One of the main differences between nomological causation and metaphysical causation is the mediation of laws of nature. If a causal relation is mediated by a law of nature, it is a nomological causation. But if it is not mediated by a law of nature, it is a metaphysical causation. For Schaffer, both kinds of causations are types of one genus, namely directed determination relation. Karen Bennet explains them as species of the genus building relations. Wilson thinks there are various similarities between grounding and causation--both these relations are transitive, asymmetric, and irreflexive. In the following, I will try to develop a response to CO based on these similarities.

4. Grounding: A New Reply to the Causal Objection

Some philosophers believe that the relation between natural and moral properties is grounding. Let us put this as the following:

Moral Grounding (MG): Some moral properties are grounded in natural properties.

As I already mentioned, grounding relations have been interpreted in various ways throughout the literature. Here I read the grounding in MG as Wilsonian grounding and assuming that MG is plausible, I try to evaluate Wilsonian grounding as a reply to CO. The core idea is that if moral properties are grounded in natural properties and this grounding relation is understood as Wilsonian grounding, then

nomological causation is not a necessary condition for perception (premise III of CO is false). If this is the case, assuming the plausibility of MG, we, then, can perceive moral properties without interacting with them in a nomological causal relation.

The main motivation behind taking nomological causation as a necessary condition of perception is preventing accidentality. It seems that there are various similarities between Wilsonian grounding and nomological causation. I believe that these similarities are enough to enable grounding to prevent accidentence. Here is a construction of my argument:

1. Nomological causation prevents accidentence.
2. Metaphysical causation is pretty similar to nomological causation.
3. If Metaphysical causation is pretty similar to nomological causation, then metaphysical causation prevents accidentence too.
4. Metaphysical causation prevents accidentence.
5. $MC = G$
6. Therefore, Grounding can prevent accidentence.

Premise 1 is plausible for the opponent of MP too. The sub-argument for premise 2 is an analogy. Metaphysical causation and nomological causation have common logical properties: transitivity, asymmetry, and irreflexivity. Although there is no consensus on whether grounding and causation have these logical properties, most of the paradigm cases of grounding and causation seem to have these properties. Furthermore, Shaffer (2016) points out some other metaphysical properties shared by nomological causation and grounding:

Mediation of Laws

The mediation of laws in both nomological causation and metaphysical grounding is ankey point of similarity that suggests grounding can prevent accidental perception. In the case of nomological causation, the connection between cause and effect is not haphazard or random but is governed by robust laws of nature. These laws ensure a regular, predictable connection between causes and their effects. Similarly, the relation between grounds and what they ground is not arbitrary or accidental but is regulated by general principles of metaphysics. These grounding principles dictate how certain facts or properties give rise to others in a structured, orderly way. While the specific laws at play are different - laws of nature for nomological causation, metaphysical principles for grounding - the key point is that both types of connection are law-governed rather than random or contingent. This non-accidental, law-mediated character is precisely what enables nomological causation to prevent accidental perceptual links, and it suggests that metaphysical causation (grounding) can do the same. The mediation of laws, whether natural or metaphysical, imposes a kind of necessity and predictability on the relation that precludes the kind of accidental connection that would undermine genuine perception. So, while the

details of the laws may differ, the very fact that both grounding and nomological causation are law-governed is another striking similarity that supports the idea that grounding can play the same epistemic role in perception that causation is often thought to play.

Modality

The modal relationship between grounding and grounded bears a striking resemblance to that between cause and effect, further reinforcing the analogy between metaphysical and nomological causation. As Fine (2016) has noted, there is a global supervenience relation that holds in both cases. For causation, this means that the totality of effects supervenes on the totality of causes - there cannot be a difference in effects without some difference in causes. Similarly, for grounding, the totality of grounded facts supervenes on the totality of grounding facts - there cannot be a difference in grounded facts without some difference in grounds. This global supervenience constrains the modal space of possible cause-effect and ground-grounded pairs, ensuring a necessary connection between them. While the specific relations of cause to effect and ground to grounded may be contingent, the general modal framework of global supervenience holds necessarily. This shared modal structure is another significant commonality between metaphysical and nomological causation, suggesting a deep similarity in their ability to provide a robust, non-accidental link between the relata. Just as the global supervenience of effects on causes assures us that perceived effects are not accidentally related to their causes, so too the global supervenience of grounded facts on their grounds could assure us that perceived grounded facts (such as moral properties) are not accidentally related to the grounds (such as natural properties) in virtue of which we perceive them.

Epistemic Force

Provided that certain conditions are met, the epistemic force of grounding and causation are similar. We can infer grounded from the ground as well as inferring effect from cause.

The epistemic force of grounding, akin to that of nomological causation, further bolsters the idea that grounding can prevent accidental perception. Just as knowledge of a cause can justify inferring the effect, knowledge of grounding facts can justify inferring the grounded facts. When I perceive a grounded property, such as a moral property, my perception is not accidental because it is epistemically tied to and justified by my perception of the grounding natural properties. This epistemic inferential link is unidirectional and defeasible, holding only when certain background conditions are met, such as knowledge of the relevant grounding principles. But the same is true of the epistemic link between cause and effect. So, while the epistemic force of both grounding and causation

is conditional, it still provides a robust epistemic tether that can prevent the kind of accidental connection that would undermine genuine perception. This epistemic similarity between grounding and causation thus lends further support to the idea that grounding can play the accidentence-preventing role traditionally assigned to causation in philosophical theories of perception.

These similarities might be good reasons to think if nomological causation can prevent accidentence, grounding can do it too. One might still object that why should we think these common properties enable grounding to prevent accidentence? In other words, two good questions are raised here: what property or properties make(s) nomological causation able to prevent accidentence and does grounding have that or those properties (es) or not? A plausible explanation as to why nomological causation prevents accidentence is its tight relation with laws of nature. The mediation of these laws makes a robust relation between causes and effects. However, grounding does not work by the mediation of laws of nature, it works with another kind of law: general principles of metaphysics. There is a big advantage for grounding over nomological causation here. The relation between causes and effects is contingent whereas the relation between ground and grounded is necessary. That is because nomological causation works with laws of nature and laws of nature are contingent, but grounding works with general principles of metaphysics that are necessary. Grounding necessitarianism is an orthodox view through the literature (e.g. Fine and Schaffer). Grounding necessitarianism holds that full grounds necessitate the facts they ground. So, if the contingent relation between nomological cause and its effect(s) satisfies the accidentence prevention constraint, the necessary relation between ground and grounded satisfies this constraint a fortiori. Grounding and nomological causation “have the same general logical features, they come in analogous flavors, and they bear the same general connections to explanation.” (Wilson, 2017. P729). Now one more step to defend premise 3 is to show that the disanalogies between nomological causation and grounding do not harm grounding’s accidentence prevention. In the following, I will discuss some of these disanalogies.

Synchronicity

While grounding is synchronic, nomological causation is diachronic. Grounded facts are grounded at the same time that grounds ground them whereas, usually the effects take place later than the causes. However, it seems that this distinction does not work. Since there are some diachronic instances of grounding as well as synchronic instances of causation. Consistent time travel can question the diachronicity of causation and historical grounds can question the synchronicity of grounding (Wilson, 2017). But let us suppose that this distinction is still plausible. Does it harm premises 2 and/or 3? No! For Wilson’s account of $G=MC$ can explain why such a distinction works. Nomological causation is diachronic

since it is mediated by laws of nature that typically impose diachronic constraints whereas, grounding is mediated by general principles of metaphysics. So, there is no reason to find this distinction against premises 2 and 3.

The Relation to Concrete Dynamical Processes

The apparent disanalogy between grounding and nomological causation with respect to concrete dynamical processes does not, upon closer examination, undermine the thesis that grounding can prevent accidental perception in a manner analogous to causation. While it is indeed the case that instances of nomological causation often involve the transfer of physical quantities, such as mass-energy, from cause to effect, as is evident in the paradigmatic example of colliding billiard balls and the concomitant transfer of momentum, such concrete physical transfer is conspicuously absent in cases of grounding. When a moral property is grounded in certain natural properties, for instance, there is no observable flow of mass-energy from the grounding natural properties to the grounded moral property. However, this prima facie dissimilarity can be readily explained by appeal to the disparate types of laws that mediate nomological causation and grounding, respectively. Nomological causation, being governed by the laws of nature, which themselves concern the behavior of physical quantities, naturally often involves the transfer of such quantities. Grounding, in contrast, is mediated by metaphysical principles, which need not have any bearing on physical quantities at all. The absence of concrete physical transfer in instances of grounding, then, is merely a reflection of the different nomological domains inhabited by grounding and nomological causation, rather than a deep dissimilarity that would call into question the capacity of grounding to prevent accidental perception. The accidentence-preventing power of grounding, like that of causation, is rooted in the robust, law-governed connection it provides between the grounding and the grounded, irrespective of any concrete physical processes that may or may not accompany this connection.

Production

Hall (2004) distinguishes between two kinds of causation: causal production and causal dependence. This distinction is not only against $G=MC$ and premise 3, but also explains why production is not a necessary condition for causation and we can still verify non-productive dependencies as causal.

Hall’s distinction between causal production and causal dependence provides further support for the notion that grounding can prevent accidental perception, even in the absence of productive causation. According to Hall, causal production involves a direct, physical connection between cause and effect, where the cause in some sense generates or brings about the effect. Causal dependence, on the other hand,

is a more general notion, encompassing any counterfactual dependence of the effect on the cause, regardless of whether there is a direct physical link. This distinction is significant for the present discussion, as it suggests that productive causation is not necessary for a causal relationship to hold. Instead, what matters is the counterfactual dependence that is characteristic of causal dependence. This has important implications for the analogy between grounding and causation. If grounding is understood as a form of metaphysical causation, as per Wilson's (2017) argument, then it need not involve any direct, productive link between the grounding and the grounded. Instead, what matters is the counterfactual dependence of the grounded on the grounding, which is secured by the metaphysical principles that govern grounding relations. This non-productive nature of metaphysical causation does not undermine its status as a form of causation, nor does it vitiate its ability to prevent accidental perception. Just as non-productive causal dependence can underwrite genuine, non-accidental perceptual links, so too can the non-productive counterfactual dependence of grounding. The distinction between causal production and causal dependence, then, far from being an objection to the grounding-causation analogy, actually reinforces the idea that grounding can prevent accidental perception in a manner analogous to causation, even in the absence of any direct, productive link.

Fundamentality

While the ground is more fundamental than grounded, no sense of fundamentality is connected to the nomological cause. However, Grounding orders the world as sensitive to fundamentality, and nomological causation orders the world as sensitive to time. Wilson again explains this distinction by appealing to the law mediations. If the dependent facts are from different times, they are mediated by laws of nature and thus this dependence is nomological causation. If the dependent facts are from different levels of fundamentality, they are not mediated by laws of nature and thus this dependence is metaphysical causation. So, if these disanalogies do not work, therefore premise 3 is plausible.

For premise 5 I rely on Wilson's (2017) arguments. Finally, since my argument for »Grounding can prevent accidentance relies on analogy, it may not be a sound argument. But I think it is still a plausible argument to accept the conclusion.

Grounding to become a plausible reply to CO still needs a positive argument to show that the relation between natural and moral properties actually is grounding or say MG is plausible. However, for the sake of argument, I take it for granted that this relation is grounding, there are different explanations to think so. One explanation starts with an analogy between moral properties and some other non-moral grounded properties. For instance, the natural kind property of being a cat is grounded in the physical features of the cat. But still, when we look at those physical features, we intuitively

perceive the cat. Moral properties are like natural kind properties in the sense that they are grounded on natural properties. So, if I can perceive natural properties why not see moral properties too?¹

If this analogy works and the conclusion (6) is plausible, then we might be able to respond to the causal objection in the following way:

- S perceives O only if her perception is not a mere accident.
- S's perception is not a mere accident, only if she is appropriately connected to O.
- Grounding is an appropriate connection to O.
- MG
- Therefore, (provided other relevant conditions) S perceives O.

5. Objections

Suppose that the pen on my desk belongs to my fiancé Maryam. Provided that ownership is a moral property, it seems one cannot perceive Maryam's ownership.

This objection highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to moral perception. While it may seem intuitive that we cannot directly perceive Maryam's ownership of the pen, this does not necessarily undermine the moral perception thesis in its entirety. Instead, it suggests that a more fine-grained analysis of moral properties is required to determine which ones are eligible for perception. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic moral properties, as previously discussed, provides a promising framework for this analysis. Intrinsic moral properties, being non-relational and inherent to the object or situation, seem more apt for direct perception than extrinsic moral properties, which are defined by relations to external factors. Ownership, being a paradigmatic example of an extrinsic moral property, is defined by the relation between the owned object and the owner. As such, it may not be directly perceptible in the same way that intrinsic moral properties, such as the wrongness of cruelty, might be. By limiting the scope of moral perception to intrinsic moral properties, the advocate of moral perception can sidestep the ownership objection while still maintaining that a significant class of moral properties are perceptible. This move is not ad hoc, but rather flows naturally from the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction that is independently motivated by considerations of moral ontology. The ownership objection, then, does not refute moral perception as such, but rather highlights the need for a more refined understanding of which moral properties are suitable candidates for perceptual awareness.

One might object that since natural kind properties are non-normative properties and moral properties are normative properties, the analogy doesn't work.

However, this objection can be met by pointing out that perception of normative properties is not only possible but plausible in other domains, particularly in aesthetics. Just as we can perceive the natural kind property of being a cat, grounded in the physical features of the feline, we can also perceive the aesthetic property of being melodic or harmonious, grounded in the physical features of a musical piece. Similarly, we can perceive the aesthetic property of being pretty, grounded in the physical features of a design or a painting. These aesthetic properties, like moral properties, are normative in nature, as they concern value and prescribe certain attitudes or behaviors. Yet their normative status does not preclude their perceptibility, as long as they are grounded in observable physical features. The deep analogy between aesthetic and moral properties suggests that the normative nature of moral properties is not an insurmountable obstacle to their perceptibility. If we can perceive normative aesthetic properties, there is no principled reason why we cannot also perceive normative moral properties, provided they are similarly grounded in observable natural features. The objection from normativity, then, loses much of its force when we consider the broader realm of normative properties that we seem capable of perceiving. The analogy between moral and aesthetic properties, both being normative and grounded in physical features, supports the plausibility of moral perception and deflects the objection based on the normative/non-normative distinction.

Conclusion

A Wilsonian understanding of grounding can give us an alternative relation that can do the accident prevention job. Provided that the relation between moral and natural properties is grounding, Wilsonian grounding gives a plausible reply to CO. If my reply to CO works, then the premise III of CO is false. Provided that other necessary conditions of moral perception (like background moral beliefs) are met, the combination of MG and Wilsonian grounding can also turn into an argument in favor of MP. If moral properties are grounded in natural properties and grounding can prevent accident and other conditions are met, then we can perceive moral properties too.

Notes

1- Here the positive argument for moral properties actually being grounded, based on an analogy to natural kind properties, is more of a sketch or promissory note. As acknowledged, this would need to be developed more to fully defend moral perception. Central to such an argument might be the notion that moral properties, akin to natural kind properties, are not fundamental features of reality, but are instead grounded in more basic, observable properties. Just as the property of being a cat is grounded in the physical features and behaviors of felines, moral properties such as goodness or wrongness may be grounded in the natural, observable features of actions,

characters, or states of affairs. This grounding relation is precisely what enables the perception of natural kind properties, as we can perceive the underlying physical features that ground the higher-level kind property. If moral properties are similarly grounded, this opens up the possibility of moral perception, as we may be able to perceive the natural features that ground the moral properties.

The plausibility of this analogy is reinforced by its alignment with prominent naturalistic theories of moral ontology, such as Cornell realism (Boyd, 1988) and moral functionalism (Jackson & Pettit, 1995). These theories posit that moral properties are not *sui generis* features of reality, but rather are constituted by or reducible to natural properties. If such naturalistic moral ontologies are indeed on the right track, then the analogy between moral and natural kind properties is not merely superficial, but reflects a deep structural similarity in their metaphysical grounding.

Funding and/or Conflicts of interests/Competing interests.

No funding was received from anywhere for this project. No conflict/competing interests.

Data availability/ Ethical approval/ Informed consent.

N/A

References

- Boyd, Richard (1988). "How to Be a Moral Realist. In G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*. Cornell University Press. pp. 181-228.
- Fine, K. (2012). "Guide to Ground", in F. Correia & B. Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, *Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 45, Issue 178, January 1995, Pages 20–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2219846>
- Hall, N. (2004). "Two Concepts of Causation", in J. Collins, N. Hall & L.A. Paul (eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- McBrayer, J.P. (2010a). *Moral Perception and the Causal Objection*. *Ratio*, 23(3), 291-307.
- Schaffer, J. (2012). "Grounding, Transitivity, and Contrastivity", in F. Correia & B. Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2016). "Grounding in the Image of Causation", *Philosophical Studies* 173: 49–100.
- Werner, P.J. (2020). "Which Moral Properties Are Eligible for

Perceptual Awareness?”, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17: 290–319, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-20182801>.

- Werner, Preston. (2016). Moral Perception and the Contents of Experience. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.
- Wilson, A, (2017). “Metaphysical Causation,” *Noûs*, 723-751.