"On Experiencing Moral Properties"
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Introduction

Do we *perceptually experience* moral properties like rightness and wrongness? For example, as in Gilbert Harman's classic case, when we see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, can we, in the same robust sense, *see* the action's wrongness?[1] (Harman 1977).

Many philosophers have recently discussed this question, argued for a positive answer and/or discussed its epistemological implications.[2] My main aim in this paper is to present a new case for a negative answer.

To do this we must first get much clearer on how such experience could be possible at all. I will do this by revisiting Robert Cowan's recent discussion of this in the course of responding to the so-called Looks Objection against such possibility (Cowan 2015). Cowan argues, and nobody would deny, that perceptual experience of moral properties can't be like the experience of sensory qualities like colors. Instead, he compares it to experience of completion and to experience of kind membership. I will argue that experience of moral properties isn't plausibly like those either. Experience of completion involves a sense of unity of form behind occlusion (Briscoe 2011, Nanay 2010). But nothing like that is even remotely characteristic of putative experience of moral properties. Experience of kind membership relies on typical looks (Lyons 2007). But moral properties don't have typical looks. Rather, the right comparison case is putative experience of linguistic meaning which

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[1] Two comments. First, the question is about perceptual experience or seeing in a *robust* sense. Many people would grant that in the above case we can *just* see that the action is wrong, in the sense of non-inferentially knowing it without knowing how we know it. But our question is whether we can *visually* experience or see the action's wrongness in a more substantive way to be established. Second, I will conduct the discussion in terms of seeing wrongness and rightness, even though perhaps it's more plausible that we experience prima facie wrongness/rightness or reasons for or against actions etc. As far as I can see, nothing in the discussion depends on this.

[2] For example, Audi 2013, Cullison 2010, Chudnoff 2015, Crow 2014, Faraci 2015, McBrayer 2010.

is thought to involve employment of semantic competence cognitively penetrating perceptual experience and causing experience of meaning. Similarly, putative experience of moral properties is only possible if some affective or cognitive state cognitively penetrates perceptual experience and causes experience of moral properties. (Sections 1-3)

After having established how we could perceptually experience moral properties at all I want to look at the case for the positive answer. I will do this by responding to Preston Werner's recent extension of the familiar contrast argument used by Tim Bayne and Susanna Siegel in the case of kind membership to moral properties (Bayne 2009, Siegel 2006, 2007, 2011). Werner argues roughly as follows: 1) a normal adult and a person lacking affective empathy have phenomenally different overall experiences upon seeing the hoodlums burn the cat; 2) this contrast is *best explained* by the fact that the normal adult sees that the act is morally wrong whereas the person lacking affective empathy doesn't (Werner 2014). I respond by arguing that there is an alternative, much better explanation of the contrast available (Sections 4-5).

Finally, building on the work done before, I present my case for the negative answer by developing what I call the Redundancy Argument against experience of moral properties (Section 6).

1. How Could We Experience Moral Properties I: Completion

Everybody agrees that we can have sensations of, and that we can perceptually experience *sensory qualities*. For example, consider the following pairs of sensations and perceptual experiences:

	Sensation	*Perceptual Experience*
Visual	Seeing pitch black all around	Seeing a red apple
Auditory	Hearing ringing in your ears	Hearing a bird sing
Tactual	Feeling warmth on your arm	Touching a ball

As can be seen, we visually experience at least color (more precisely, hue, saturation, and brightness), auditorily at least volume, pitch, and timbre and tactually what Matthew Fulkerson has recently called intensive features like thermal qualities (hot/cold) and texture qualities (smooth/rough) etc. (Fulkerson 2014: Ch. 5).

Now, consider the common *Looks Objection* (LO) against experiencing moral properties:

P1) Experience of moral properties is possible only if there is a way moral properties look.

P2) There is no way in which moral properties look.

C) Experience of moral properties is impossible.

Robert Cowan has responded to this objection by claiming that LO equivocates on the term 'looks'. He claims that if we think of 'looks' in terms of experience of sensory qualities then P2 is plausible, but P1 isn't. However, if we think of 'looks' in terms of less robust sort of experience then P1 is plausible, but P2 isn't.

In order for this response to work we need to know more about the less robust sort of experience which is supposed to provide a model for the experience of moral properties. Cowan tries to tell us more by drawing a distinction between what he calls "phenomenal presence representation" and "phenomenal presence as absence representation" (Cowan 2015: 169).[3] His main examples of the latter are experience of completion and kind membership. But, as I will argue next, neither experience of completion nor experience of kind membership provides the right model for experience of moral properties. We need a different model.

Let's start with the experience of completion. Even though experience of completion is frequently illustrated with drawings (and I will do so as well, below), the phenomenon is ubiquitous. In fact, one could claim that there is no properly perceptual experience without completion (and constancy). Think back to the cases I presented above and contrast seeing pitch black all around you with seeing a red apple on a table. In the former case you don't seem to see an object that you're confronted with apart from your
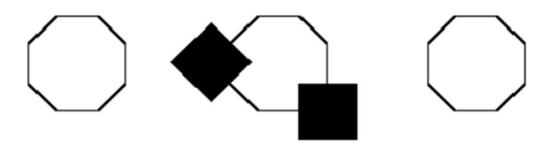
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[3] The term 'presence as absence' comes from Alva Nöe. (Nöe 2004, 2006).

own state. When you move or shift your gaze your experience could slightly vary, but there is no sense of an object staying the same or being independent of your experience. In contrast, seeing a red apple on a table involves the *objectification* of both the apple and the table – when you move or shift your gaze your experience varies, but there is a distinct sense of the objects' staying the same and being independent of your experience.[4],[5]

Objectification is closely related to the perceptual duality of perspectivality and completion. Consider again looking at a red apple on the table. On the one hand, it's natural to think that in some sense you only see its facing surface and its qualities as given from your particular egocentric perspective. After all, only the facing surface reflects light to your retina, its backside does not. Yet, at the same time you clearly have a sense of the apple's being a whole, three-dimensional object. This is an example of the duality of what's given from your perspective vs. completion. For another example of completion consider seeing the tail and the hind legs and the head and the front legs of a cat behind a picket fence. Again, in some sense you only see the unoccluded parts. Yet, at the same time you experience the cat as a complete object. (Noë 2004: 60) Nothing like this duality and no completion more generally is present in the case of mere sensations like seeing pitch black.

Now to some drawings, illustrating amodal completion:

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[4] At least in the case of vision, objectification is closely related to *figure-ground separation*. In the case of seeing pitch black all around you nothing pops out as a figure against the ground. In contrast, in the case of seeing a red apple on a table both the apple and the table pop out.

[5] Something similar can be said about hearing a bird singing where it's the sound that is objectified and in relation to which we can move, as well as touching the ball where it's the ball that becomes objectified and which we can tactually explore (Fulkerson 2014: Ch. 6, O'Callaghan 2007: Ch. 3, 6).

When looking at these drawings, observers typically report having a sense of the part occluded by a diamond completing as a diamond would, and the part occluded by a square completing as a square would.

Such cases of amodal completion involve a sense of a particular sort of unity in the object's shape behind occlusion. As such, they have a distinctive, perhaps imagistic, phenomenology. It should be clear that the putative perception of the hoodlum's act's wrongness doesn't feature such phenomenology and amodal completion doesn't therefore provide a good model for thinking about experience of moral properties.[6] We need a different model.

2. How Could We Experience Moral Properties II: Perceptual Learning

Cowan's second example of less robust sort of experience is *recognitional* experience of kind membership. For example, take the perceptual recognition of a tree as a pine tree. Cowan follows Susanna Siegel who has articulated the following picture of how such recognition works:

A perceiver who can recognize trees by sight seems to have some sort of memory representation, and some sort of perceptual input, such that the input 'matches' the memory representation, and the cognitive system of the perceiver registers that this is so… (Siegel 2006)

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[6] Cowan also makes two general remarks about the difference between experience of sensory qualities or "presence" and less robust sort of experiences or "presence as absence". I want to here briefly comment on the first (I will comment on the second a bit later). Namely, that experience of sensory qualities presents us with properties that we are suitably counterfactually sensitive to in the sense that if the property had not been present and the rest of the scene was held constant, then the experience would have changed. For example, if I experience a red apple then I'm presented with a particular shade of redness and it's true that if the redness had not been present I would have had a different experience. In contrast, experience of completion does not present us with properties we're counterfactually sensitive to. Even if the apple lacked a backside or we were dealing with undetached cat parts we would still have the same experience. (Cowan 2015: 171-172) This is a nice way of elucidating the contrast between experience of sensory qualities and all less robust sort of experiences, but it doesn't help us any further because it doesn't tell us *which* of the less robust sort of experiences that exhibit this feature is a good model for experience of moral properties. As I argued above, experience of completion is not.

On this picture a person acquires the capacity for recognizing pine trees by being shown exemplars that have a similar *look* which we can think of as a cluster of sensory qualities and being told that they belong to a category like *pine tree*. This leads to the memory representation that pairs the look with the category. When the person then sees an exemplar and registers its look, the pairing is accessed, and the look is matched with the category, resulting in a categorization of the exemplar as a pine tree.

Let's call this the *Matching* model.[7] Cowan hopes to extend this model to the experience of moral properties:

Supposing that Matching is plausible for pine trees, the ethical analogue of the development of a pine tree recognitional capacity is that an ethical expert could come to possess a memory representation(s) corresponding to e.g. wrongness, and that this is matched with perceptual inputs when there is some relevant correspondence (in terms of low-level features) between the two. (Cowan 2015: 178).

Unfortunately, the matching model can't be so extended. The basic problem is that it relies on typical looks (Lyons 2007, Reiland 2015a). Pine trees can be perceptually recognized because they have a typical look: a particular profile of sensory qualities. Those pine trees that lack that look cannot be recognized. More generally, things that don't have a typical look can't be perceptually recognized at all. For example, my favorite things lack a typical look. Some look one way and others look another. Similarly, wrong acts lack a typical look: there is nothing visually in common between the hoodlum's igniting a cat, a man cheating on his wife and corporate fraud.[8]

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[7] Cowan follows Siegel in thinking of *Matching* as involving cognitive penetration. However, this is not mandatory, and, in my opinion, not very plausible. Diachronic perceptual learning does not need to depend on cognitive penetration (for discussion, see Lyons 2005, 2007). However, this won't really matter for us here.

[8] A referee asks whether, even if wrong acts lack a typical look, couldn't actions that have *thick* moral properties like being cruel or being selfish have such looks (for more on thick moral concepts and properties see Väyrynen 2016). This is an interesting idea. Nevertheless, it seems false. Suppose a medieval torturer tortures a prisoner and thereby performs a cruel action. Now, suppose your lukewarm lover explicitly flirts with someone else in your presence with the clear intention of causing you emotional pain. S/he thereby also commits a cruel action. Yet, it's clear that there needs to be nothing visually or otherwise perceptually in common between those actions (especially if we assume that the caused suffering isn't evident in the second case).

In fact, one might think that the Looks Objection is the strongest against the idea that since we can perceptually recognize things as belonging into certain natural and functional kinds, we can also perceptually recognize them as having moral properties. Thought of this way, the Looks Objection allows for quite a liberal sense of 'look' and then insists that moral properties don't have typical looks in this sense.[9]

In sum, neither experience of modal/amodal completion nor recognitional experience of kind membership provides a good model for experience of moral properties. This also means that Cowan's response to the Looks Objection doesn't work. However, all is not lost. One can try to adopt a different model and try to respond to the objection differently.

3. How Could We Experience Moral Properties III: Semantic Properties and The Non-Matching Model

Consider another frequent example of putatively experienced high-level property, linguistic meaning or semantic properties (Bayne 2009, Siegel 2006, 2011). Experience of meaning is not thought to be like experience of kind membership since it doesn't proceed on the basis of typical looks or sounds in the sense of profiles of sensory qualities. Words that mean the same can look and sound completely different, either within a language ('ophtalmologist' and 'eye doctor') or across languages ('koristama' means 'clean' in Estonian, but 'adorn' in Finnish). Thus, if meanings are experienced they aren't experienced on the basis of looks or sounds.

Rather, the experience of meaning, if it exists, must work roughly as follows (Reiland 2015b). First, you hear some sounds and hear them *as* particular phonemes. Second, you

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[9] Here's Cowan's second general remark about the difference between "presence" and "presence as absence". He again appeals to Macpherson's work in telling us that experience of objects and their sensory qualities provides a sort of spatial framework into which "presence as absence representation" is *added*. (Cowan 2015: 172-173). This isn't implausible in the case of completion. Completion plausibly involves mental imagery and thus it makes sense to think that the experience of objects and their sensory qualities provides an iconically represented spatial framework to which some mental imagery is added (Briscoe 2011, Nanay 2010). However, it seems to me a non-starter in the case of experience of kind membership. Cowan writes "e. g. the phenomenal representation of the pine tree property is added to the space occupied by the pine-tree-making low-level properties" (Cowan 2015: 172). But what could this even mean? To recognize an object as belonging to a kind is not a matter of having anything added to your phenomenal representation. It's to have a conceptual, propositional attitude.

hear or otherwise recognize the sounds *as* utterances of particular words and sentences qua expression types. Third, you *employ* your *semantic competence* with the words and sentences qua expression types in a particular language. Finally, you couple this with the knowledge of the speech situation (e. g who the speaker is, location, time, and world of the utterance, addressee etc.) to figure out the locutionary act the speaker performed. After all this, your employment of semantic competence cognitively penetrates your auditory experience, causing you to also hear the sounds as utterances of particular words and sentences qua expression types used with *particular meanings*.

It's natural for someone who adopts this model to respond to a Looks Objection against the experience of meanings by simply denying P1, the claim that experience of meanings is possible only if they look a certain way. Rather, one can claim, it is possible due to direct cognitive penetration by a background state.

Cowan briefly mentions a very similar model of how experience of moral properties could work, calling it the *Non-Matching* model. On this view the perceptual experience of the hoodlums burning the cat first causes an emotional experience or an intellectual seeming or a judgment that the act is wrong and then one of these cognitively penetrates the perceptual experience causing you to *further* see the act as wrong (Cowan 2015: 178-179).

Now, Cowan mentions the No-Matching model as one possible model. My point here is that it's the only plausible model of how experience of moral properties could work. And on this model, one should respond to the Looks Objection by simply denying P1 and claiming that the experience is possible due to direct cognitive penetration by an emotion or a judgment.

The fact that putative experience of semantic properties is the right model for experience of moral properties is highly significant in considering whether the latter occurs. No one denies that completion is perceptual and most people working on recognitional experience of kind membership agree that it's at least partly a perceptual and not a wholly cognitive phenomenon.[10] But lots of people deny that we perceptually experience semantic properties and claim that this is a wholly cognitive phenomenon (O'Callaghan 2011, Reiland 2015b). Furthermore, as we will see next, the standard arguments used to argue for

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[10] What they mainly argue over is whether recognitional experience has sensory or perceptual phenomenology or rather the sort of cognitive phenomenology characteristic of concept use (see Reiland 2014 for discussion).

experience of kind membership don't extend quite as easily to the case of experience of semantic and moral properties.

4. The Contrast Argument

A standard way of arguing for the experience of kind membership and or meaning is by using a phenomenal contrast argument (Bayne 2009, Siegel 2006, 2007, 2011). The argument works by starting from an obvious contrast in phenomenology between the overall experience of a person who lacks some sort of capacity (e.g a recognitional capacity for a kind, semantic competence with a particular language) usually called the Novice, and the overall experience of the same person after they've acquired that capacity, now called, the Expert.

Preston Werner has extended this argument to the moral case. However, he uses an interpersonal case. Consider two individuals. One of them is a normal adult *Norma*. The other one is an "emotionally empathic dysfunctional individual" (EEDI), *Pathos*, who has a fully functioning "theory of mind" in being able to attribute mental states to others, yet can't feel any empathy towards them.

Now imagine Norma and Pathos see the hoodlums ignite the cat. It seems plausible that Norma's overall experience *O1* of which the perceptual experience *E1* is a part and Pathos's overall experience *O2* of which the perceptual experience *E2* is a part differ in phenomenal character (for discussion see Werner 2014: 9-10). Following Siegel, the argument now proceeds as follows:

(1) *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character.

(2) If *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character, then *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character.

(3) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character.

(4) If *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character, then *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.

(5) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.

(6) If *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them, then *E1* and *E2* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the wrongness of the hoodlum's act while having them.

(7) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the wrongness of the hoodlum's act while having them.

The argument has three substantive and controversial premises which require defense: (2), (4), and (6). Going in the reverse order, (6) can be supported by arguing that differences between *E1* and *E2* are not due to their experiencing different non-moral properties. I find this very plausible (for discussion, see Werner 2014: 16-17).

Similarly, (4) can be supported by arguing that the differences between *E1* and *E2* are not due to differences in non-representational aspects of their phenomenology or raw feels, if there are any. I find this relatively plausible as well (Werner 2014: 11-12).

Finally, (2) can be supported by arguing that the best way to explain why *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character is by taking *E1* and *E2* to differ in phenomenal character. I think this is where the argument fails.

5. A Response: Affective Phenomenology

Norma's and Pathos's overall experiences *O1* and *O2* clearly differ. In order to be able to infer from this that their perceptual experiences *E1* and *E2* differ, one must rule out alternative explanations. Werner considers three such explanations. Namely, that Norma's and Pathos's overall experiences differ because:

i)   N *judges/believes* that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong, whereas P doesn't

ii)   N *desires* that the cat's suffering end, whereas P doesn't

iii)   N has the *seeming/intuition* that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong whereas P doesn't

Werner argues against i) as follows. It's true that Norma arrives at a moral judgment that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong. However, he claims that it's possible that Pathos has been trained to think that as a matter of general principle such acts are wrong and that he arrives at such a judgment as well. However, even if that were the case, the phenomenal contrast would remain. (Werner 2014: 12-13)

Werner's argument against ii) is similar. It's true that Norma has a desire that the cat's suffering end. However, again, perhaps Pathos has been trained to have such a desire for instrumental reasons as well. However, even if that were the case, the phenomenal contrast would remain. Furthermore, it might be that in certain circumstances even Norma would lack such a desire because even though she can experience the act as being wrong or prima facie wrong, she knows it's necessary to prevent a larger calamity from happening. (Werner 2014: 13)

Finally, we come to iii), the view that their overall experiences differ because of different seemings or intuitions. Werner argues against this by first noting that there are two ways of thinking of seemings: either seemings are beliefs/dispositions to believe or sui generis states. If the former, then similar arguments apply as before. However, the most common and most interesting construal of seemings is as sui generis states (see, amongst others, Brogaard 2013, Chudnoff 2013, Lyons 2005, 2009, Reiland 2014, 2015a, Tucker 2010). Here, he has two things to say. First, that he doesn't accept this construal. Second, that it would be implausible to explain the phenomenal contrast in the case of experience of kind membership by appeal to a priori intuition and thus, by analogy, it would be implausible here as well (Werner 2014: 15). But here the waters are muddied by the addition of 'a priori' before 'intuition'. Lots of people, perhaps the majority, who have thought about the phenomenal contrast in the case of kind membership think that it is precisely to be explained by appeal to the fact that only the Expert has a perceptual seeming or intuition to the effect that the thing seen is a pine tree (see, e. g. Brogaard 2013, Lyons 2005, Reiland 2014). And many people also hold a similar view in the moral case (Chudnoff 2015, Lyons 2018).

Be the strength of Werner's arguments against the three options as it may, he doesn't consider the simplest and most obvious alternative explanation. Namely, that Norma's and Pathos's overall experiences differ because:

iv)   the former feels *empathy* with its distinctive affective phenomenology and the latter doesn't.

It's built into the case that Norma feels empathy and Pathos doesn't. After all, empathy is supposed to be what cognitively penetrates the perceptual experience and causes seeing the act's wrongness. But empathy has plausibly a distinctive affective phenomenology in itself (for discussions see Goldie 2009, Zahavi 2014).

Why doesn't Werner consider this obvious explanation? He seems to acknowledge that "something distinctively affective seems to underlie the contrast" (Werner 2014: 11-12). However, he only considers the view that empathy is what explains the difference under the rubric of differences in affective raw feels and dismisses this as implausible because he thinks that affect is intentional. However, he never even considers the view that empathy has affective *intentional* phenomenology. I submit that the most direct explanation is that the contrast is due to such phenomenology. We need further reasons to think that the contrast is distinctively perceptual.

6. The Redundancy Argument Against Experiencing Moral Properties

Having discussed the alternative explanation, we can now state the Redundancy Argument against experiencing moral properties. Here's a natural philosophical picture of the steps involved in Norma's experience and arrival at the moral belief that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong. First, she perceptually experiences the hoodlum's burning the cat. Second, she has an affective empathic response to what she sees. Third, this leads to her having the moral seeming, intuition, or judgment that the act is wrong. Finally, she endorses the seeming/intuition/judgment and forms the belief that the act is wrong (for discussion of this process see Lyons 2018). What's different with Pathos is that upon experiencing the burning, he fails to have the affective empathic response and thus doesn't form the moral

seeming/intuition (even though, as Werner argues, he could form the judgment on general grounds).

If we don't experience moral properties then the above picture is complete. However, if we do then the above picture includes a further step. Namely, the affective empathic response or the seeming/intuition/judgment also cognitively penetrates the visual experience, causing you to *see* the action as wrong.

Now, notice that the affective empathic response together with the seeming/intuition/judgment suffices to explain Norma's moral stance on the case, her belief that the act is wrong. Postulating the further step involving cognitive penetration of visual experience doesn't seem to add anything to *this* story at all. As far as the arrival at moral belief, it is completely redundant. This shows that we need other reasons to postulate it. The only other reason standardly mentioned is that such experience explains phenomenal contrasts like the one appealed to by Werner. But as I argued above, the affective empathic response can do that on its own. Thus, the postulation of further cognitive penetration of perceptual experience by the affective empathic response is explanatorily redundant. Hence, absent any other reason to postulate it, we shouldn't.[11]

Let me close by noting that the Redundancy Argument can be thought of as a challenge to all of those who want to argue that we experience of moral properties: for this to be plausible there must be some work for it to do. But given that such experience relies on the presence of a state that seems to be able to already explain everything there is to explain, it's very hard to see what work that would be.

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[11] Two comments. First, I've previously given a parallel Redundancy argument against experience of meanings (see Reiland 2015b). There the claim is that employment of semantic competence explains understanding and its cognitive phenomenology or sensory accompaniments explain the relevant phenomenal contrasts. Thus, the postulation of further penetration of perceptual experience by the employment of semantic competence doesn't do any work. Second, after having written this paper, I found out that a similar argument is given by Pekka Väyrynen in his paper "Doubts About Moral Perception" (Väyrynen 2018). While I suggest that the phenomenal contrast is explained by Norma's empathy with its affective phenomenology, he suggests instead that it is explained by the fact that Norma's seeing the scene together with her emotional response leads her to make a habitual inference to the act's being wrong. However, he argues, like I do above, that an account that doesn't postulate a further step on which this inference cognitively penetrates perceptual experience is simpler and more unified than one that does.

Acknowledgements

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