The Role of Affect in Moral Grasp and Understanding

I. Intro

What is the role of affect in moral epistemology? Sentimentalists assert that moral knowledge is rooted in knowledge of specific situational moral truths, which affect is a necessary means for attaining. Rationalists claim moral knowledge is rooted in moral principles, knowledge of which is acquired a priori through reason alone; affect is unnecessary. Note that in this way of framing the debate, the issue concerns solely moral *knowledge*. Recent epistemology, however, has also highlighted the importance of *understanding* as an epistemic good separate from knowledge. As such, *moral* understanding might have value over and above mere moral knowledge. Some philosophers have pointed to the importance moral understanding possesses for reliably doing the right thing, justifying yourself to others, developing virtue, and performing morally worthy action (Hills 2009; Callahan 2017). In this paper, I argue that the sentimentalist account of understanding both specific moral truths and moral principles has significant advantages over, and can ground, the rationalist alternative.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In sec. II, I set up the debate between rationalists and sentimentalists. This will make apparent the advantage that the rationalist has when it comes to accounting for our knowledge of moral principles and the sentimentalist has in accounting for knowledge of specific moral truths. I then introduce the notion of understanding and a key feature which separates it from knowledge: *grasping*.[[2]](#footnote-2) In sec. III, I consider a rationalist account of moral grasping and then present a dilemma for it. I then argue for a sentimentalist account of moral grasping in sec. IV. This will involve giving a two-tier approach with emotional experiences at the level of specific moral truths, and emotional dispositions at the level of moral principles. This sentimentalist account is not mutually exclusive to the rationalist account, but rather more explanatory basic than it.

II. Rationalism vs. Sentimentalism

Rationalists picture moral epistemology to be grounded in intellectually known general principles such as ‘murdering is wrong’. They stress an analogy between morality and mathematics. Just as mathematical knowledge is based on knowledge of mathematical principles, which are known through reflection on the mathematical concepts they contain, moral knowledge is based on knowledge of moral principles, which are known a priori through reflection on the moral concepts they contain. Once one possesses the concepts of murder and wrong, one will be able to acquire a justified belief and ultimately know that murdering is wrong upon reflection.[[3]](#footnote-3) This a priori knowledge is then combined with a posteriori knowledge of contingent facts about the world to come to know what is right or wrong in specific situations. Once one realizes that John has murdered someone, this realization, combined with the a priori principle ‘murder is wrong’ allows one to know that John’s action was wrong. For the rationalist then, emotions can only have a distorting influence on the process by which we acquire moral knowledge.

By contrast, a sentimentalist gives emotions and affect a central role in moral epistemology.[[4]](#footnote-4) The sentimentalist picture is more empiricist: our knowledge of morality is analogous to our perceptual knowledge of the world around us. If I have a visual experience that makes it seem as if there is a red ball, this experience justifies me in believing that there is a red ball. Similarly, moral knowledge is grounded in our experience of moral qualities in specific situations, where the relevant experience is emotional or affective. Emotional experiences thus function as a kind of perception of value (Modern defenders include Tappolet 2016; Kaupinnen 2013; Milona and Naar 2019; Oddie 2009). When I feel guilty that I told a lie, my guilt represents my action as wrong, and on its basis, I come to know that I acted wrongly. Since sentimentalists appeal to perceptual-like experiences, our moral knowledge is grounded in knowing specific moral truths about particular persons, actions, and events. Call such propositions singular moral propositions. In technical terms, for any proposition p, p is a singular proposition if it is about a particular object in virtue of having that object as a direct constituent.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, other mental states can also represent moral value, such as belief. But the sentimentalist will claim that while evaluative beliefs only *represent* their content, emotions *present* their content, in the sense that emotions give us a more direct awareness of the value that they represent.[[6]](#footnote-6) In other words, the emotional representation is more experiential, or *phenomenological*.

At this point, rationalists will retort that moral knowledge of singular moral propositions always depends upon prior knowledge of necessary a priori principles. These general moral truths hold a priori, and we do not need any kind of worldly experience to confirm them. You do not need experience with torture of innocents to know that torturing an innocent person for fun is wrong. Simply reflecting on what the proposition means is sufficient to know it is true. Since one can know these truths based on merely understanding the concepts they contain, they are necessary truths. Sentimentalists will reply that part of the way we test moral principles is by considering specific cases. If our experience is strong enough, we are epistemically required to reject or modify the principle. The epistemic relation goes the other way around.

This debate has remained at a stand-still for a long time, but some philosophers have made various attempts to make headway. For instance, Michael Milona (2017) argues that once we focus on the modal nature of various moral truths, we will find that the sentimentalist has an advantage over the rationalist. However, I would like to reframe the debate entirely. The above dialectic, which is the common way of framing the debate, concerns solely moral knowledge. But recent epistemology has highlighted the significance of another epistemic value irreducible to knowledge, *understanding*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

What separates understanding from mere knowledge? Epistemologists point out that understanding involves ‘seeing’ the relations or ‘grasping’ some kinds of relations as constitutive of understanding. Indeed, theorists take this grasping or seeing to be the central notion to be analyzed. Jonathan Kvanvig claims:

understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations…(Kvanvig 2003: 192-193)

While Kvanvig here is discussing understanding a body of information, the same kind of grasping is essential to understanding individual propositions, including moral ones. There might be other components, such as a true belief or even knowledge,[[8]](#footnote-8) but grasping is what separates mere knowledge from a deeper understanding. To see the difference between mere moral knowledge and moral understanding, consider testimonially formed moral beliefs. This moral testimony example is due to Allison Hills:

Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend [Mary], who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong. (Hills 2009: 94)

Because Eleanor knows that Mary is very reliable on moral matters, she does gain knowledge that eating meat is wrong. However, we can imagine that although Eleanor knows that eating meat is wrong, she is still not on an epistemic par with Mary. Eleanor might lack a deeper understanding of what she has learned from her. The deeper moral understanding is thus something over and above mere moral knowledge. Intuitively, moral understanding involves a deeper grasp of what is known (Kvanvig 2003; Grimm 2011).

Since understanding is a richer mental state and harder to attain than mere knowledge, *moral* understanding is thought to have value over and above mere moral knowledge. Some philosophers point to the importance moral understanding might possess for reliably doing the right thing, justifying yourself to others, developing virtue, and performing morally worthy action.[[9]](#footnote-9) If these theorists are correct to claim that moral understanding, but not necessarily mere moral knowledge, comes with these benefits, then perhaps the debate between rationalists and sentimentalists should refocus on who can better account for our understanding of both singular moral propositions and moral principles.

The task for both schools of thought, then, is to give an account of grasping both singular moral propositions and the more general moral principles. For a rationalist to maintain that affective states are not necessary for grasping either, she must proffer an account of grasping which goes beyond the account of moral knowledge, and also does not make use of affect.

III. The Rationalist Account of Moral Grasping

Hills herself offers such a rationalist account on which grasping requires no affect. On her view, grasping a proposition *p* amounts to understanding why *p* is true. She says, “Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true.” (Hills 2009: 101) On Hills’ theory, the grasping central to understanding a proposition, *p*, is grasping of the reasons why *p* is true, which is further reducible to certain abilities:

When you grasp a relationship between two propositions, you have that relationship under your control. You can manipulate it. You have a set of abilities or know-how relevant to it, which you can exercise if you choose. For instance, if you understand why p, you can give an explanation of why p and you can do the same in similar cases. (Hills 2015: 663)

Thus, the objects of grasping here are the reasons why *p* as well as their relations to *p*. One grasps a proposition when one can reason about the proposition, explain it, and infer similar propositions. As such, it appeals to an *inferentialist* conception of grasping (I will consider a different conception later). More specifically, Hills argues that grasping why *p* can be distinguished by the following abilities:

(i) follow an explanation of why *p* given by someone else;

(ii) explain why *p* in your own words;

(iii) draw the conclusion that *p* (or that probably *p*) from the information that *q*;

(iv) draw the conclusion that *p*´ (or that probably *p*´) from the information that *q*´ (where *p*´ and *q*´ are similar to but not identical to *p* and *q*);

(v) given the information that *p*, give the right explanation, *q*;

(vi) given the information that *p*´, give the right explanation, *q*´ (Hills 2013: 555)

The two propositions that Hills refers to are the proposition to be understood (*p*), and the other propositions (*q*) which ground p’s truth. This theory gives us a nice rationalist account of moral grasping. It is grounded in our rationality through our inferential capabilities, and it also goes beyond the rationalist account of knowledge. It also gives us a unified account of grasping both singular moral propositions and moral principles. One grasps either when one grasps *why* they hold—one can infer the propositions, explain them, and infer and explain similar propositions. This grasping why is the kind of grasping essential to moral understanding on her view. Additionally, no affect is necessary on this account.

The rationalist account of grasping also handles another desideratum for theories of understanding. It is widely thought that while knowledge with respect to a specific proposition is binary, understanding comes in degrees. This theory accounts for degrees of understanding in two manners. The first is through the multiplicity of aspects. The more of conditions i-vi one meets, the more understanding one has and vice versa. These various conditions are also either binary or come in degrees. The ones that come in degrees give us further calibrations in one’s degree of understanding. Consider condition (i), which one could satisfy to a greater or lesser extent. Eleanor might be able to follow, although with difficulty, the explanation given by Mary as to why eating meat is wrong, thus satisfying condition (i) to a moderate level. However, condition (iv) is binary. With the little understanding Eleanor has, she might not be able judge the moral status of similar cases, such as animal testing for medical purposes. Only meeting one condition to a moderate level allows us to say that Eleanor is beginning to understand the wrongness of eating meat, or has a tiny amount of understanding, but far from fully understanding it.

Despite these advantages, this account, with the specific capabilities it appeals to, suffers from a structural flaw that can be pressed by a dilemma. First, consider that understanding, like believing, can be attributed to someone occurrently or non-occurrently. Even when Mary is asleep, she still understands that eating meat is wrong. Her understanding is just non-occurrent. When she is engaged in conversation with Eleanor, by contrast, her understanding is occurrent. Prima facie, it seems that the non-occurrent understanding is simply the disposition to have the thoughts and impressions of occurrently understanding that *P* when it becomes relevant.[[10]](#footnote-10) Non-occurrent understanding is thus dependent on having occurrent understanding. Once we make this distinction, a dilemma arises for Hills’ account. The conditions are meant to be an account either of occurrent or of non-occurrent grasping. Both of these options present problems.

Let us first take the capabilities theory as an account of occurrent grasping. As a side note, this is the more desirable phenomenon for any theory of understanding to be explaining because non-occurrent grasping seems parasitic on the occurrent state.[[11]](#footnote-11) But as an account of occurrent grasping, the capabilities theory seems implausible. When Mary is asleep, she still has the capabilities to do (i)-(vi). On this version, her understanding is occurrent even though it is playing no active role in her psyche. Even if this issue could be resolved, it remains unclear how one could distinguish a non-occurrent state from an occurrent one if the latter consists in a collection of latent capabilities.

The more natural reading is that these capabilities constitute the non-occurrent state and that one’s grasping is occurrent when one is actively *exercising* the capabilities. The problem with this option is that Mary might be in an occurrent state of grasping while exercising none of the capabilities in (i)-(vi). She might simply be reflecting on the fact that eating meat is wrong. She understands what she is thinking about, but she is not following anyone else’s explanation, drawing a different conclusion from slightly different circumstances, or explaining it in her own words. On this version of the view, we would have to say that her understanding is not occurrent, but this is surely incorrect.

This argument may be stated as follows

P1. If conditions (i)-(vi) are a theory of understanding, they are either a theory of occurrent or non-occurrent understanding.

P2. If they are a theory of occurrent understanding, then there are occurrent mental states that play no active role in the person’s mental life.

P3. If they are a theory of non-occurrent understanding, the Mary’s understanding is non-occurrent when she is simply reflecting on the wrongness of eating meat.

P4. There are no occurrent mental states that play no active role in the person’s mental life.

Subconclusion 1-Conditions (i)-(vi) are not a theory of occurrent understanding.

P5. Mary’s understanding is occurrent when she is simply reflecting on the wrongness of eating meat.

Subconclusion 2-Conditions (i)-(vi) are not a theory of non-occurrent understanding.

C-Conditions (i)-(vi) are not a theory of understanding.

One response to the above argument is to push back on P3 by noting that this premise relies on the assumption that if one accepts the capabilities as the non-occurrent state, then one must equate the occurrent state as the exercising of these capacities. If one accepts the capacities as the non-occurrent state of understanding, but analyzes the occurrent state in another manner, then they can reject P3. The issue with this strategy is that such a difference between occurrent and non-occurrent states stands in need of independent motivation. The analysis of the non-occurrent mental state normally depends on what one’s analysis is of the occurrent state. If one’s analysis of x’s occurrently desiring P is for P to appear good to x, then the non-occurrent desire would be the disposition for P to appear good to x. On the strategy being pursued, one would analyze non-occurrent understanding in terms of reasoning capacities, but then analyze the occurrent state as something other than the exercising of these capacities. Why the mismatch? If one thinks that occurrent understanding that P is something other than reasoning about or explaining P, then why not simply analyze the non-occurrent state as the disposition to be in this other state, and treat the reasoning as a sign of understanding?

This dilemma casts doubt upon the capabilities as a theory of moral grasping. However, the sentimentalist need not entirely reject this inferentialist approach. After all, being able to reason about a proposition and explain it are signs that one understands it. The sentimentalist, then, can take these capabilities as signs or symptoms of grasping, but not their essence. They may be necessary, but they are not sufficient.[[12]](#footnote-12) Perhaps affect can undergird these capabilities in some way.

IV. The Sentimentalist Account of Moral Grasping

To construct a sentimentalist view of moral understanding, I will first give a sentimentalist account of grasping singular moral propositions. After showing why this account cannot be straightforwardly applied to moral principles, I then turn to a different sentimentalist account of grasping moral principles. This will make the overall account less unified than the rationalist alternative, but, as we will see, grasping moral principles will be dependent upon, and thus closely related to, grasping of singular moral propositions. Both will essentially involve affect.

IV.1 Sentimental Grasping Singular Moral Propositions

To avoid the dilemma with the inferentialist conception of grasping the rationalist proffered, the sentimentalist can appeal to a *phenomenal* conception of grasping singular moral propositions. Phenomenally grasping a proposition consists in having a phenomenal experience, an experience that there is something it is like to have, with the proposition as the content (Bourget 2015). For instance, if one is told that the sun is 1.3 million times the volume of the earth, then one knows this fact, but one does not really comprehend this size difference. Then someone holds up a soccer ball and an apple seed to demonstrate the size difference (Bourget 2015). Now it seems that you really grasp the size difference because of the phenomenal experience, in this case visual, that was had.

A sentimentalist can apply this phenomenal grasp to singular moral propositions. What are the unique phenomenal states that allow one to experience moral propositions? The sentimentalist will naturally propose emotional experiences and support this phenomenologically. There is a quality of experiences in virtue of which it feels like an awareness of the normativity, the obligatory authoritative nature, of morality. I might know that I have acted wrongly by lying, but when I feel guilty about telling a lie, it is my guilt specifically by which I experience my act as wrong, as having violated a demand.[[13]](#footnote-13) One would be skeptical if I claimed that I was experiencing that my act was wrong, but felt no guilt whatsoever. The same holds for other cases as well. I grasp that John’s murder is wrong by experiencing indignation at his act. What Mary has, but Eleanor lacks, is the emotional dismay from witnessing the animals’ conditions at factory farms. She, but not Eleanor, feels demanded upon to act. To claim that the persons in these cases could experience the moral propositions, but remain cold-hearted, seems inconceivable.

For the sentimentalist, then, one grasps these singular moral propositions *p* in a phenomenal sense by having an appropriate emotional experience of *p*. The sentimentalist account of grasping singular moral propositions is thus the following:

**Moral Grasping Singular Moral Propositions**: One has a full moral grasp of a singular moral proposition *P* to the extent that one has an appropriate phenomenal emotional experience with *P* as content.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Because the moral proposition enters into the phenomenal content of the emotional experience, this account takes on a substantive view regarding the nature emotions. Specifically, it assumes that at least some emotional experiences have moral content as phenomenal content.[[15]](#footnote-15) Early proponents of the idea that the feeling of an emotion is bound up with its intentionality include (Goldie 2000: 4) with his notion of “feeling towards,” and (Johnston 2001). Modern defenders of the thesis that emotions have phenomenal evaluative content include (Helm 2009) and (Ballard 2021). For instance, on Helm’s view, “we can understand the phenomenology of emotions in terms of their intentionality: that to experience an emotion is just to be pleased or pained by the import of your circumstances.” (Helm 2009: 252) Rival views take the content of the emotion to be one’s bodily state or changes in one’s bodily state rather than moral content.[[16]](#footnote-16) There are other views according to which the moral proposition is part of the content of the emotion, such as the judgmental theory (Nussbaum 2004). However, construing emotions as mere judgments will not give them the kind of phenomenal intentionality needed for grasping (merely judging that *p* is not sufficient to grasp that *p*.) Even some perceptualist views of emotions only commit to their having representational content without also presenting that content (Döring 2003).[[17]](#footnote-17)

This account easily avoids the occurrent/non-occurrent understanding distinction objection pressed against Hills. The account analyzes the occurrent state, and the non-occurrent state is simply the disposition to be in the appropriate phenomenal emotional experience with *P* as content. When Mary is asleep, she still grasps that eating meat is wrong because she is still disposed to shock and anger when she witnesses the conditions at the factory farm.

Of course, the sentimentalist will need to fill in the details of what counts as an ‘appropriate’ emotional experience. One condition for appropriateness is that the emotion be fitting. If someone tells a very funny joke which happens to be offensive to the surrounding audience, I might have a strong moral reason not to have, or at least express, my amusement. If a mother of three suddenly loses her husband to an accident, she might have strong prudential reasons for not mourning the loss since she now has extra burden to support her family.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, while these are strong reasons for not having the emotions, they are the wrong kind of reasons because the emotions still *fit* their objects. Amusement fits a funny joke and grief fits the loss of a loved one. This fittingness is partly what makes an emotion appropriate. Mary’s shock and anger fit the tortuous conditions at the factory farm because these are the reasons why eating meat produced there is wrong.

Crucially, the other condition that makes an emotion appropriate is that it be to the right degree. If one is treated slightly unfairly, this would make slight indignation appropriate, and one can easily imagine instances where one could overreact. Contrastingly, if one was the victim of a gross injustice because of an openly racist act, strong indignation would be appropriate. If such a person was only slightly frustrated, we would think she did not fully grasp the moral significance of what was done to her. Given that emotional reactions can be too strong or too weak, the sentimentalist can stipulate an exact degree of emotional experience that is appropriate for each singular moral proposition.[[19]](#footnote-19) If one’s level of emotion is too far over or below this specific degree, this shows a misunderstanding. This condition allows the sentimentalist account of moral grasping to accommodate degrees of understanding. The closer one’s emotion is to the appropriate level, the better one understands and vice versa.

This sentimentalist account of understanding singular moral propositions has a significant advantage over the rationalist alternative when it comes to accounting for one special class of singular moral propositions. There is a pre-theoretic intuition for some specific singular moral propositions that while we all know them to be true, we do not really understand or fully comprehend them. Take for example the propositions ‘Stalin was evil’, or ‘the Holocaust was atrocious.’ Most of us know both of these propositions to be true, but there is common-sense support for the idea that we do not, *and cannot*, really grasp just how atrocious the Holocaust was or how evil Stalin was. I am not speaking to the incomprehensibility of the psychology involved, of how people are capable of such heinous acts. I am rather pointing to the sheer awfulness that we think is difficult to even put into words. The millions of deaths, suffering, psychological torment, and subsequent ripples of sorrow just seem to defy human comprehension.

The sentimentalist theory of grasping has a perfect explanation for why such statements seem beyond human comprehension. With all the horrific events involved in the Holocaust, the appropriate kinds of emotional response would be disturbance, indignation, and/or grief, and the appropriate level of such a response is very high. The fact that it is set so high would explain why such propositions defy human understanding: no human has the emotional capacity to feel the immense level of emotions required.

Notice that on Hills’ rationalist account, not only can one understand these propositions, but doing so to a high degree is easy. It is not hard to explain what made the Holocaust atrocious or draw this conclusion yourself once you know the details of concentration camps and how many people were killed during this time. Nor is it difficult to draw the conclusion that other historical incidences of state implemented genocide and mass killings were also atrocious. Thus, the rationalist actually predicts that such propositions are easy to understand.

IV.2 The Sentimentalist Account of Understanding Moral Principles

Unfortunately, the sentimentalist theory of grasping singular moral propositions is not as easily extended to moral principles as its rationalist counterpart. To see why, let us get a clearer as to what the moral principles we most commonly understand are. One might claim that the kinds of moral principles we hold to are exceptionless generalizations. However, there are very few true such moral generalizations.[[20]](#footnote-20) Straightforward versions such as ‘lying is wrong’ admits of exceptions. One might retreat here to qualified principles, such as ‘lying is pro-tanto wrong.’ Even if the action is overall the right thing to do, there do not seem to be cases where the lying itself does not contribute negatively to the overall moral status of the action. The issue with this appeal is that it does not seem as if people have ever reflected on these qualified principles nor consciously deliberate upon them in coming to knowledge about specific cases.[[21]](#footnote-21) Most people do not have the concept ‘pro tanto’ and have not thought about which principles hold universally without exception.

Intuitively, the kinds of moral principles people know and understand are unqualified ones such as ‘Injustice ought to be stopped’, ‘Lying is wrong’, and ‘Bravery is a good character trait’. These statements seem true despite the fact that they admit of exceptions. Lying to save a life and lying while playing a secret identity game do not seem wrong. Thus, these moral principles are not exceptionless universal statements; rather, the best way to characterize these general moral propositions is as instances of a broader class known as generics.[[22]](#footnote-22) These looser moral generalizations do not express face value universally quantified propositions and are true despite admitting of exceptions. Other examples include 2-4 in the following:

1. Dogs are mammals
2. Dogs have four legs
3. Geese lay eggs
4. Mosquitos carry West Nile Virus

1 holds without exception, but the rest admit of exceptions and are true despite the increasing number of exceptions they admit. 2 is true even though some dogs have lost legs or were born without four. 3 holds even though only about half of all geese, namely the females, actually lay eggs. 4 holds even though a small minority of mosquitos actually carry West Nile. Moral generics similarly are true despite admitting of exceptions. ‘Lying is wrong’ is true, but not exceptionless, and many persons understand such generalizations. In contrast with the pro tanto qualified principles, it does seem that many people have had thoughts of the generics ‘lying is wrong’ or ‘bravery is a good character trait’.

Philosophers have given theories for the meaning and subsequent semantics of such statements, and I will discuss the most prominent account, the normality view, as it will present a problem for extending the sentimentalist’s emotional phenomenal view of grasping to moral generics. According to the normality view, generics express something that is normal for members of a certain type. This view comes in two varieties depending on how normality is spelled out. On a normal *worlds* view, generics state what members of a kind are like in normal circumstances, which are explicated in terms of normal possible worlds (Pelletier and Asher 1997). Dogs have four legs in normal birth conditions and no accidents. On a normal individuals view, generics state something about normal individuals in the actual, or nearby, possible worlds (Nickel 2016). Normal dogs have four legs, and abnormal ones are missing some. On either view, generics are in fact universal quantified propositions, just with a restricted domain or set of possible worlds. On the normality view of moral generics, then, ‘murder is wrong’ says something about normal cases of murder, or something about murders in normal worlds where they occur. On either view, ‘murder is wrong’ is made true in virtue of various murders across possible worlds.

When the semantics of generics are kept in mind, the sentimentalist account of emotional phenomenal grasping moral principles becomes implausible. Recall that on the sentimentalist account of grasping singular moral propositions, grasping is a matter of experiencing the truth of the proposition. This amounted to having an emotional experience with the proposition as the content. This is not to be taken in a strong sense where the proposition, qua metaphysical entity or linguistic expression, is what the emotion is directed at. Rather, the emotion has a propositionally structured content in the form of an object under a certain aspect, such as when one’s guilt has a past action as the object, which is presented as wrong.[[23]](#footnote-23) In other words, the emotion is not directed at the proposition, but the state of affairs which makes the proposition true.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Do we also grasp the truth of moral generics through emotional experiences directed at the truth-makers for such generics? This is psychologically implausible. We do not seem to be experiencing a set of possible worlds or range of normal murders when we grasp the proposition ‘murder is wrong’. It would take too long to run through all the different possible murders, or actively recall a list of all the ‘normal’ murders to grasp the proposition. One could claim that we imagine all these possible worlds or normal instances simultaneously, but this seems even more implausible. For this reason, a sentimentalist should opt for an inferentialist conception of grasping moral principles.

Recall that on the rationalist inferentialist conception, judgments or beliefs are the essential mental states to understanding. Contrastingly, on a sentimentalist inferentialist notion of grasping, affect will be essential to grasping moral principles. The sentimentalist can further strengthen the account by making it dispositional. The dispositionalist strategy I have in mind is purely dispositional in the sense that we attribute someone a grasp of a certain proposition in virtue of the dispositions that they have, not the other way around. Constructing a dispositionalist account of grasping demands specifying which dispositions are the relevant ones. What are the states that an agent is disposed to be in, such that we would attribute grasping a certain principle to them? Our attributions of grasping here are not playing a metaphysical role of determining who grasps and who does not, but rather are an epistemological tool by which we can pick out what the relevant dispositions are.

Consider this example. A one-mile course has been mapped out for a middle school track meet. The track happens to have a concave shape similar to the outline of a cashew or crescent. One of the middle school runners looks at the course thinks to herself, ‘At the place where the course indents, I can just run straight across the gap and I will have run less than the full mile.’ Her thinking will be something like this…



Everyone else’s route

My route



On subsequent races, this middle school runner looks for this same concave pattern and applies her strategy systematically. While she does not have this explicit thought, this pattern of thinking demonstrates that the middle schooler grasps that every concave figure can be closed off with a less shallow indentation, or a straight line, which reduces the length of the perimeter. We are willing to grant her a grasp of this geometrical truth in virtue of her ability to recognize and grasp instances of this truth.

The sentimentalist can apply this to moral principles and appeal to the phenomenal account given in the previous section. One grasps a moral principle when one is disposed to emotionally grasp instances of it. One grasps that lying is wrong when one is disposed to anger when one is lied to and guilt if one lies to another person. Additionally, recall that moral principles, as generics, admit of exceptions. These exceptions are not instances of the moral principle, but a theory of understanding should accommodate a sensitivity to these exceptions. Hills’ rationalist theory can simply bake these exceptions into the class of inferences to be drawn. One will judge that lying for malicious purposes is wrong, but lying to save a life or lying while playing a secret identity game is not wrong.

For the sentimentalist, our affective reactions must be sensitive to the exceptions. When one grasps ‘lying is wrong’, one will be outraged upon discovering a spouse has been lying to them about a relationship kept hidden, but also overjoyed to find out that a supposed trip to the store is actually a planned night out to one’s favorite opera. A first pass at the sentimentalist account of grasping moral generics is thus the following:

**Grasping of Generic Moral Propositions**: One has a grasp of a generic moral proposition *p* to the extent that one is disposed to have appropriate emotional experiences towards singular instances of *p*, *q*’s, as well as exceptions to *p*, which obtain.[[25]](#footnote-25)

While the account appeals to emotional dispositions, it makes an appeal to a specific kind. Call temperaments dispositions to have certain emotions and moods not directed at any specific objects.[[26]](#footnote-26) Irritability is the temperament that disposes one to become angry. In contrast, sentiments are dispositions to feel certain emotions towards the same object, or the same kinds of objects.[[27]](#footnote-27) Examples here are loving your spouse and despising politicians. In these cases, your emotional experiences concern a specific object or kind of objects. Sentiments also potentially dispose one to patterns concerning different emotions. Loving someone not only means tending to joy at their happiness, but also disappointment at their failing to achieve their goals. Sentiments are fully constitutive of grasping generic moral propositions on this sentimentalist account. When I grasp that lying is morally wrong, I am disposed to feel a range of emotions concerning a class of actions, namely lying. I will be disposed to feel anger when I encounter someone lying, guilt when I lie, as well as mixed emotions about grey areas like white lies.

One issue with the account as stated is that one must be disposed to grasp any singular instances of generic moral propositions that obtain, but this is too demanding. There are all sorts of singular moral propositions which hold that we do not grasp, and calibrating one’s level of grasp to them would hence preclude us from grasping their respective generics. For instance, there are numerous murders that go on every hour around the world, but we obviously do not grasp all of them. Does this entail that all of us lack a grasp that murdering is wrong? Hardly. While there are numerous murders occurring worldwide we are not aware of, we still seem to grasp that murdering is wrong.

To accommodate this, the sentimentalist can set the level of sufficiency not at most singular instances that obtain, but only those *whose obtaining enters one’s experiential awareness*. For instance, if one sees a murder, hears a murder, believes that one is happening, or remembers one that happened, then the murder has entered one’s experiential awareness. It is only when we become aware in one of these manners of an instance of murdering that we are required to respond emotionally and grasp the wrongness of the act. This allows there to be cases of various morally significant events going on around the world which we do not emotionally experience that do not count against our grasping their respective generics. The modified account is stated as follows:

**Grasping of Generic Moral Propositions**: One has a grasp of a generic moral proposition *p* to the extent that one is disposed to have appropriate emotional experiences towards singular instances of *p*, *q*’s, as well as exceptions to *p,* whose obtaining enters one’s experiential awareness.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Now one’s level of grasping tracks one’s emotional attunement to instances that one becomes aware of. This is how the account handles degrees of understanding. There is a grey area where there might not be a fact of the matter whether one grasps or does not grasp a generic. This might be the range of starting to grasp, but not fully. A person might be only disposed to react emotionally to a small number of instances that enters into her awareness. Additionally, some sensitivity to exceptions is likely to be necessary for a grasp of moral principles. Even if I grasp all the positive cases of the wrongness of lying, it demonstrates a significant lack of grasp if I get angry at someone lying while playing a secret identity game, or at a partner who lies to cover up a surprise birthday party.

Since the account utilizes dispositions, the sentimentalist account of grasping generic moral propositions analyzes the non-occurrent state. The occurrent state of grasping a moral generic is simply the manifestation of the disposition, grasping singular instances (or the exceptions). This means that, as long as one is disposed to grasp enough instances of the corresponding generic, an emotional experience can be an occurrent state of grasping both a singular instance (phenomenally) and the corresponding generic (inferentially). In experiencing guilt over a lie I told, I occurrently grasp that telling the particular lie I did was wrong and that lying in general is wrong.

The sentimentalist account only requires that agents have a disposition to be in certain phenomenal states. Although unlikely, one can grasp a moral generic without ever actually entering the phenomenal state. For instance, most of us grasp that the practice of child sacrifice is morally wrong. However, none of us (hopefully) have never actually witnessed this practice, nor imagined this practice taking place. As such, we have never had the relevant emotional experiences of grasping an instance of this fact even though we all grasp this moral generic.

V. The Value of Moral Grasping

We are now in a position to see how moral grasping both grounds certain epistemic capabilities and composes part of one’s moral character on the sentimentalist view. On the epistemic side, we can see how emotions and sentiments undergird the reasoning capabilities that Hills lists. With a disposition to emotional grasp various moral truths, one attains an *independent* ability to form moral beliefs given the non-moral information. If Eleanor were to feel the dismay at the animals’ conditions, she would no longer need to rely on Mary to form the belief that the animals’ conditions are cruel, or reason that such practices are wrong.[[29]](#footnote-29) Additionally, her dismay at similar cases would allow her to form the judgments that other similar practices, such as animal testing for cosmetics, are also wrong.

This conception of moral grasping can also be seen as a crucial component of one’s moral character, for one aspect of moral character is having a moral concern: caring about the morally relevant features of a situation.[[30]](#footnote-30) Grasping via emotions and sentiments captures both the cognitive and affective components of such a concern. First, morally relevant features will stand out more clearly to persons with moral concern. They will pick up on details of a situation and this sensitivity is born out in the fact that it is these aspects that cause the emotional reaction rather than others. When Mary tours a factory farm and picks up on the fact that there is no outdoor space at the farm, and that the enclosures are too small, this shows that she cares about how the animals are being treated.

The emotional reactions capture the affective component of moral concern. It is a general sign that one is concerned with morality when they feel anger at wrongdoings, comfort at people doing the right thing, and guilt when one realizes they have done wrong. It would be implausible to claim one cares about morality but has none of these emotional reactions. Mary’s subsequent anger from seeing the abusive equipment further demonstrates that she really is concerned for the well-being of the animals in the farm.

Moral grasp is thus a crucial component of one’s moral concern. There might be other components, such as a desire which motivates one to act or a corresponding belief about the situation. Regardless, such a moral concern is itself a component of one’s overall character, and actions motivated on the basis of this concern make them praiseworthy. The sentimentalist account of moral grasp thus accounts for how moral understanding enables moral reasoning, enhances the moral worth of one’s actions, and forms a part of one’s overall moral character.

VI. Conclusion

I will briefly recap my arguments. I first noted that the standard debate between rationalists and sentimentalists is framed solely around moral knowledge. However, there are good reasons to reframe the debate around moral understanding and its crucial component, grasping. I then considered a rationalist account of moral grasping, but rejected it because of its inability to accommodate the occurrent/non-occurrent distinction. I then offered a sentimentalist phenomenal account of grasping singular moral propositions, arguing that it can both undergird our reasoning capabilities and explain why certain singular moral propositions seem to defy human understanding. However, because this account is not plausibly extended to account our understanding of moral principles, I argued that the sentimentalist should opt for an inferentialist approach at the level of moral principles. If I am correct, this sentimentalist account explains how moral understanding is crucial for both making our moral actions fully praiseworthy as well as developing moral character.

Bibliography

Arpaly, Nomy (2002). “Moral Worth.” *Unprincipled Virtue*, 67–116.

Audi, Robert (1994). “Dispositional Beliefs and Disposition to Believe.” *Noûs* 28 no 4: 414-434.

Ballard, Brian Scott (2020). “The Epistemic Significance of Emotional Experience.” *Emotion Review* 13, no. 2: 113–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073920957082>.

Bartlett, Gary (2018). “Occurrent States.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 no 1: 1-17

Broad, C.D. (1954). “Emotion and Sentiment”. In: D. Cheeney (ed.) *Broad’s Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy.*New York: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 283-301.

Brogaard, Berit, and Chudnoff, Elijah (2016). “Against Emotional Dogmatism.” *Philosophical Issues* 26, no. 1: 59–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/phis.12076.

Bourget, David (2015). “The Role of Consciousness in Grasping and Understanding.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95, no. 2: 285–318.

Callahan, Laura Frances. (2017). “Moral Testimony: A Re-Conceived Understanding Explanation.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 272: 437–59.

Cholbi, M. (2017). “Grief’s rationality, backward and forward.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94: 255–72.

Chudnoff, Elijah (2012). “Presentational Phenomenology.” In Sofia Miguens & Gerhard Preyer (eds.) *Consciousness and Subjectivity*. Ontos Verlag, pp. 51-72.

Dancy, Jonathan (2014). “Intuition and Emotion.” *Ethics* 124, no. 4: 787–812. https://doi.org/10.1086/675879.

Deonna, J. A., & Teroni, F. (2012). *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Döring, Sabine (2003). “Explaining Action by Emotion.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 no. 211: 214-230.

Frijda, N. (2007). *The Laws of Emotion*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Goldie, Peter (2000). *Emotions: A philosophical exploration*. Oxford University Press.

Grimm, Stephen (2011). “Understanding” In S. Bernecker and D. Pritchard (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology.* New York: Routledge, pp. 84-94.

Helm, Bennett W (2009). “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings.” *Emotion Review* 1, no. 3: 248–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073909103593.

Hills, Alison (2009). “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology.” *Ethics* 120, no. 1: 94–127.

Hills, Alison (2013). “Moral Testimony.” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 6: 552-559.

Hills, Alison (2015). “Understanding Why.” *Nous* 49, no 2: 661-688.

Howard, Nathan Robert. (2018). “Sentimentalism about Moral Understanding.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21, no. 5: 1065–1078.

Horgan, Terry, and Mark Timmons (2005). “Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory.” *Philosophical Issues* 15, no. 1: 56–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-6077.2005.00053.x.

Huemer, Michael (2007). *Ethical Intuitionism*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

James, William (1884). “What Is an Emotion?” *Mind* 9, no. 34: 188–205.

Johnston, Mark (2001). “The Authority of Affect.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63, no. 1: 181–214. https://doi.org/10.2307/3071094.

Kauppinen, Antti (2013). “A Humean Theory of Moral Intuition.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3: 360–81.

Kriegel, Uriah (forthcoming). “Imagination, Modal Knowledge, and Modal Understanding.” Essay. In Íngrid Vendrell-Ferran and Christiana Werner (eds.) *Imagination and Experience: Philosophical Explorations*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kvanvig, Jonathan L (2003). *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Little, Margaret (1995). “Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology.” *Hypatia* 10, no. 3: 117-137.

Lord, Errol (2018). “How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Deference.” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13: 71-97. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198823841.003.0004>.

Mandelbaum, Maurice (1955). *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*. Glencoe, Illinois: Glencoe, Ill. : Free Press.

Milona, Michael (2017). “Intellect versus Affect: Finding Leverage in an Old Debate.” *Philosophical Studies* 174: 2251-2276.

Milona, M., & Naar, H. (2019). “Sentimental Perceptualism and the Challenge from Cognitive Bases”. *Philosophical Studies*, 177 no. 10: 3071-3096.

Mitchell, Jonathan. (2019). “Emotional Experience and Propositional Content”. *Dialectica*, 73(4), 535-561.

Nussbaum, Martha (2004) “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance.” In Robert (eds.) *Thinking About Feeling*, Solomon, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. pp. 183-199.

Nickel, B. (2016). *Between logic and the world: An integrated theory of generics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Oddie, Graham (2009). *Value, Reality, and Desire*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Pelletier, F.J. and N. Asher (1997). “Generics and Defaults”, in J. van Benthem and A. ter Meulen (eds.) *Handbook of Logic and Language*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 1125–1179.

Prinz, Jesse J. (2004). *Gut reactions: A perceptual theory of emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press

Ross, W. D. (1930/1973). *The Right and the Good*. London, UK: Oxford Univ. Press.

Sidgwick, Henry (1874/2007). *The Methods of Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Tappolet, C. (2016). *Emotions, Values, and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Väyrynen, Pekka. (2009). “A Theory of Hedged Moral Principles.” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 4: 91-132.

1. Howard 2018 argues for a different sentimentalist account of moral understanding which includes a non-cognitive state, such as desire. I largely remain neutral on the motivational efficacy of moral understanding in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Bourget 2015 for a pivotal work on this notion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rationalists differ on the nature of the intellectual experience. Most see them as intellectual seemings based on attention to the propositions themselves such as Ross 1930; Sidgwick 1874; For a rationalist who sees intellectual experiences as perceptual see Huemer 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A different form of sentimentalism is a psychological thesis about how moral beliefs are formed. I am discussing here the normative theory about what justifies beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A proposition might be about a particular object without that object being a direct constituent. Consider ‘The Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union in 1950 was evil.’ This statement is about Stalin, but Stalin is not a direct constituent. Rather he satisfies a condition which is the direct constituent of the proposition. These propositions are called ‘particularized propositions,’ and going forward, I will assume that understanding any particularized proposition is parasitic on understanding the singular version of the particularized statement, i.e. we understand that the 1950 Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union was evil when we understand that Stalin was evil, plus background knowledge that he was the Chairman at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This epistemological and psychological view about emotions is called sentimental perceptualism. See Milona 2017; Milona and Naar 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This shift in focus has been argued for in different philosophical topics. For instance Kriegel (forthcoming) argues for such a shift concerning modal knowledge and understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Laura Callahan’s 2017 account of moral understanding explicitly has a belief component. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hills 2009 and Callahan 2017 discuss the moral value of moral understanding extensively. Howard 2018 argues for a sentimentalist conception of moral understanding that necessarily includes a non-cognitive state, such as desire. The sentimentalist conception of moral understanding I consider in this paper focuses on emotions, but I remain neutral on whether desires are also essential on the sentimentalist view. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bartlett 2018 notes that many have presupposed not only that occurrent states are manifestations of non-occurrent dispositional states, but also that occurrent states are conscious states. He contrastingly argues that occurrent states are active states. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For instance, Audi 1994 claims that many dispositional beliefs are simply dispositions to believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This kind of moral phenomenology was picked out by Mandelbaum 1955 and expounded upon by Horgan and Timmons 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is meant to be one, but a central, component of moral understanding. An ability to reason about the proposition, belief in the proposition, and an ability to grasp similar propositions might also be necessary. Other similar views have been suggested, but not as fully worked out. For instance, Lord 2018 defends what he calls a kind of appreciative knowledge, which is "the sort of knowledge that allows one to fittingly have the full range of affective and conative reactions." p. 76 Lord does not spell out which affective and conative reactions are involved. In contrast to the view being presented here, he accepts Hills' conception of understanding and claims that appreciative knowledge is independent of understanding. He says " Appreciative knowledge needn’t involve understanding since understanding requires intellectual skills that outstrip the skills required for appreciation." p. 86. Callahan 2017 Also offers a similar account of moral understanding that involves among other things, “fitting affective/motivational responses” to the proposition in question. While her view is very much in line with the view being presented here, mine does not include motivational components and specifies further what the relation is between the emotions, reasoning, and grasping. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer pressing me for this. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Defenders of this view include Johnston 2001; Dancy 2014; Goldie 2000; Ballard 2020; Helm 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For a view on which the emotion’s content is merely the bodily states and changes see James 1884. Prinz 2004 develops the view by adding that these bodily states represent the world in some way. Brogaard and Chudnoff 2016 have a similar view and explicitly argue against emotions having presentational phenomenology with respect to moral propositions because evaluative properties are ones that *merit* certain responses, and one simply cannot perceive or experience whether an object merits a certain response. On top of being controversial, their objection does not hold against other theories of value, such as a dispositional theory of value. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to make this key commitment explicit [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Example from Cholbi 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. One might object that setting an exact amount is too precise for the purpose. An alternative would be to set an appropriate range of emotional intensity that would suffice for full understanding. However, if one posits a range, then one must deal with the borderline cases. If there are borderline cases, then issues of vagueness come up. If there are no borderline cases, then one must set exact boundaries to the range, and this undercuts the motivation to avoid being unrealistically precise in our evaluations of how strong or weak an appropriate emotional response is. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Milona 2017 develops this objection in detail against the rationalist conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Milona 2017 develops this objection in more detail as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A developed account of moral principles as generics is Väyrynen 2009. Of course, the sentimentalist need not deny that there are exceptionless moral principles. Since the semantics of generics is less straightforward than the universally holding principles, I will assume going forward that my account of understanding moral generics will also apply to any universally holding moral generalizations as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mitchell 2019 argues that emotional experiences have what he calls weak propositional content in virtue of being “intentionally directed, via the relevant intentional attitude, toward an object (e.g. physical particular, person, event, or state of affairs including such things) under a specific aspect or mode of presentation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Chudnoff 2012 has a similar analysis of what he calls presentational phenomenology. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I specify ‘singular instances’ in the account because it is possible for generics to have other generics as instances. For instance, the ‘generic torturing children for fun’ might have the generic ‘torturing five-year-olds for fun’ as an instance. Only when we have named or referred to a specific child has the instance become a singular instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This closely follows Deonna and Teroni’s 2012 concept of temperaments, although they construe them specifically as dispositions to certain moods. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This also closely matches Deonna Teroni’s 2012 notion of sentiments following Broad 1954 and Frijda 2007. I am broadening their notion by adding in kinds of objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I specify ‘singular instances’ in the account because it is possible for generics to have other generics as instances. For instance, the ‘generic torturing children for fun’ might have the generic ‘torturing five-year-olds for fun’ as an instance. Only when we have named or referred to a specific child has the instance become a singular instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Little 1995 points out roles akin to these for emotions. However, the independent epistemic good she points to is concept possession, not reasoning abilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Arpaly 2002 argues that this concern is a type of desire insofar that it is a motivational state. I will remain neutral on the nature of moral concern, but even she claims that emotions are a strong sign of moral concern. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me to clarify that this is about moral character specifically. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)