11 Moral Perception

High-Level Perception or Low-Level Intuition?

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Here are four examples of 'seeing.' You see that something green is wriggling. You see that an iguana is in distress. You see that someone is wrongfully harming an iguana. You see that torturing animals is wrong.

The first is an example of low-level perception. You visually represent color and motion. The second is an example of high-level perception. You visually represent properties of the kind of object and mental properties. The third is an example of moral perception. You have an impression of moral properties. The fourth is an example of intuition. You intellectually

grasp a general moral truth.

Should moral perceptions be thought of as examples of high-level perception or as examples of intuition? Most proponents of moral perception have thought of them as high-level perceptions. I argue that at least some are examples of intuition. The obvious difficulty with this idea is that intuitions, at least as they have been traditionally conceived, target abstract generalities and moral perceptions are of concrete particulars. In dealing with this I will introduce the notion of a low-level intuition. The rough idea is: they are experiences in which we both apprehend abstract generalities and apply them to concrete particulars. I give epistemological and methodological reasons for thinking that at least some moral perceptions are best thought of as this kind of experience.

The connection to cognitive phenomenology is this. One might think that examples of moral perception count in favor of the view that there is irreducible cognitive phenomenology. They seem to present as good a case as, say, experiences of understanding. But the strength of the case depends on whether moral perceptions are sensory—e.g., high-level perceptions—or cognitive—e.g., low-level intuitions. The same issue arises for experiences of understanding. Suppose experiences of understanding are high-level perceptions that attribute semantic properties to interpretable items. Then the difference between hearing an utterance of, "Meet me by the bank," as an instruction to meet by a river and hearing it as an instruction to meet by a building need not be a difference in cognitive states. It might just be a difference in high-level sensory states. Suppose, on the other hand, experiences of understanding are not high-level perceptions, but are at least partly

cognitive states. Then the difference between the two cases is a difference in cognitive states. I do not know of a compelling argument for thinking that experiences of understanding must be partly cognitive. With respect to moral perceptions, however, I do think there is a compelling argument. That is why I focus on them here.

The plan is this. In section 1, I consider the prospects of using examples of moral perception in phenomenal contrast arguments for irreducible cognitive phenomenology. I suggest there is a gap in such arguments: they leave open the possibility that moral perceptions are sensory. In section 2, I consider the view that they are indeed sensory, and in particular that they are examples of high-level sensory perception. I find the view that this is always the case problematic for epistemological and methodological reasons. In section 3, I sketch a view according to which moral perceptions are at least sometimes cognitive, and in particular that they are at least sometimes examples of what I will call low-level intuition.

1 PHENOMENAL CONTRAST ARGUMENTS AND MORAL PERCEPTION

Phenomenal contrast arguments have played two roles in the recent literature. First, some philosophers use them to support claims about the contents of sensory perception. Susanna Siegel, for example, uses a phenomenal contrast argument to support the claim that some visual experiences represent properties of the kind of object such as the property of being a pine tree (see Siegel, 2006). Second, some philosophers use phenomenal contrast arguments to support claims about the existence of irreducibly cognitive phenomenal states. Galen Strawson, for example, uses a phenomenal contrast argument to support the claim that experiences of understanding have irreducibly cognitive phenomenology (see Strawson, 1994). It is this second role that I am concerned with. As we will see, however, the two roles interact.

But first let me say what I mean by 'phenomenal state' and 'irreducibly cognitive.' By a phenomenal state I mean a mental state that is individuated by what it is like for one to be in it. Suppose S is a phenomenal state. Then there is some phenomenal character such that it is necessary and sufficient for one to be in S that one be in a mental state with that phenomenal character. Other factors make no difference. By an irreducibly cognitive phenomenal state I mean a phenomenal state that meets two conditions. It is associated with cognition. And sensory states do not suffice for it. I am construing sensory states broadly to include sensory perceptions, bodily sensations, mental imagery, the experiences involved in episodic recall, and emotional states. If there are irreducibly cognitive phenomenal states, then there are phenomenal states associated with cognition and such that no combination of these broadly sensory states is a sufficient condition for being in them.

In my view the central commitment of proponents of cognitive phenomenology is that there are irreducibly cognitive phenomenal states (cf. Smithies, 2013). We can put it like this:

Irreducibility: Some cognitive states put one in phenomenal states for which sensory states do not suffice.

Irreducibility should be distinguished from theses that are weaker than it, stronger than it, and orthogonal to it. Among the weaker I include the thesis that some cognitive states are phenomenally conscious. Among the stronger I include the thesis that some phenomenal states can occur independently of any sensory states. Among the orthogonal I include the thesis that some phenomenal states ground intentionality. I am not going to say anything more about these other theses here.

Now let us consider an example of moral perception. There are many to choose from in the literature. The example I will focus on is a variant on one from Lawrence Blum (1991).

John and Joan are sitting on a subway train. There are no empty seats and some people are standing. One of the passengers standing is a woman in her fifties holding two full shopping bags. Both John and Joan observe her obvious discomfort. Nothing else strikes John about the woman. But Joan sees that she should offer her seat to the woman.

The story is readily intelligible. We can easily play it out in our imagination. One of the elements in it is Joan's perception that she should offer her seat to the standing woman. This is an example of moral perception.

The difference in moral perception is associated with a phenomenal difference. That is, there is a phenomenal difference between John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience. Consider, then, the following phenomenal contrast argument for Irreducibility:

- (1) John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience contain different phenomenal states.
- (2) The only possible explanations for the difference in phenomenal states are a difference in sensory states or a difference in cognitive states directed at the woman.
- (3) John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience contain the same sensory states directed at the woman—and we can always tell the story so that this is the case.
- (4) John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience contain different cognitive states directed at the woman—Joan has a moral perception John lacks.

210 Elijah Chudnoff

(5) So some cognitive states—e.g., moral perceptions—put one in phenomenal states—e.g., those that differentiate John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience—for which sensory states do not suffice.

Premise (1) reports the phenomenal contrast. We can motivate premise (2) this way: the explanation has to be a difference in phenomenally conscious states, all phenomenally conscious states are either sensory or cognitive, and the only relevant sensory or cognitive states are those directed at the standing woman. Problems arise when we come to premises (3) and (4). These premises assume that moral perceptions are cognitive states, not sensory states. But this is a substantive claim. And it is not as if simple phenomenological reflection settles the matter. If it is true, then it is true because of the nature of sensory states, cognitive states, and moral perception. So assessing it requires looking more closely into these notions. The next two sections are dedicated to this project.²

2 MORAL PERCEPTION AS HIGH-LEVEL PERCEPTION

Consider the following theses:

• High-Level Perception: If one has a moral perception that one should ϕ in a situation, then it is a sensory perceptual experience with the high-level content that one should ϕ in that situation.

• Moral Knowledge: If one has a moral perception that one should ϕ in a situation, then it can put one in a position to know that one should ϕ in that situation.

• Moral Improvement: If one has a moral perception that one should ϕ in a situation, then it might be used to correct one's prior moral beliefs to the effect that it is not the case that one should ϕ in such situations.⁴

Recent writers about moral perception have typically assumed High-Level Perception (see, e.g., McGrath, 2004; Cullison, 2010; Bagnoili, 2011; Audi, 2013; Church, 2013; Cowan, 2013; Kauppinen, 2013; Faraci, forthcoming; Werner, forthcoming). Proponents of moral perception also defend Moral Knowledge. Indeed, something like Moral Knowledge provides the epistemological motivation for interest in moral perception. Iris Murdoch emphasized a version of Moral Improvement and it has remained central to work on moral perception (see Murdoch, 1970; Bagnoli, 2011). Further, it is implicit in the method of cases that characterizes contemporary philosophical methodology: we correct general theories in light of judgments about particular cases and moral perception is a likely source of many such judgments. In this section I am going to argue that there is a tension between these three claims.

The argument depends on getting clear about two distinctions. The first distinction is between the content of perceptual experience and the object of perceptual awareness. Suppose you hear that the oven is heated to 450° by hearing that the preheated chime is sounding. Consider four claims we might make about your experience:

- [a] Part of its content is that a distinctive chime is sounding.
- [b] Part of its content is that the oven is heated to 450°.
- [c] It makes you perceptually aware of a distinctive chime.
- [d] It does not make you perceptually aware of the interior of your oven.

Claims [a] and [b] are about the content of your experience. One might doubt [b]. Perhaps a more plausible substitute is that part of the content of your experience is that the oven is ready—rather than that it is heated to exactly 450°. Claims [c] and [d] are about the objects of perceptual awareness. Claim [c] is motivated by the thought that there is the chime and you stand in the hearing relation to it. Claim [d] is motivated by the thought that even though there is the interior of your oven, you certainly do not stand in the hearing relation to it and thankfully do not stand in the feeling relation to it either. One might prefer a variant on the example: instead of hearing the preheated chime, maybe you just see a digital display of the oven's temperature. Then the case becomes more like learning how fast one is driving by looking at one's speedometer. Alternatively, one might prefer a completely different example that involves seeing emotions in facial expressions or hearing them in tones of voice. The exact example does not matter so long as the relevant distinction is clear.

The second distinction is between knowing wholly on the basis of perception and knowing partly on the basis of perception and partly on the basis of background beliefs. Let us stick with the oven example. Suppose the preheated chime sounds and consider the following claims:

- (1) There is that chime
- (2) The oven is heated to 450°

In the situation you come to know both (1) and (2). But there is a difference. You know (1) wholly on the basis of your perceptual experience. Just having the perceptual experience—given the circumstances that make it veridical—puts you in a position to know that (1) is true. You know (2), on the other hand, partly on the basis of your perceptual experience and partly on the basis of your background beliefs, such as the belief that this kind of chime signals that the oven is preheated and the belief that you set the oven to heat to 450°. Given that you know (2), the background beliefs partly on the basis of which you know (2) must also amount to knowledge. Presumably they do because of past learning.

The distinction between the different ways perception contributes to your epistemic position is one thing. What grounds it is another. There should be

some difference in how your perceptual experience stands with respect to (1) and (2) in virtue of which it can be the whole basis for knowing (1) and at most the partial basis for knowing (2). So what is the difference? In my view the difference is in the relevant objects of awareness. More specifically: your perceptual experience has (1) as part of its content and it also makes you aware of a truth-maker for (1), namely, the chime; your perceptual experience has (2) as part of its content but it does not also make you aware of a truth-maker for (2), namely the interior of the oven. So the facts reported in [a]—[d] explain the difference with respect to (1) and (2). And more generally, I find the following plausible:

Whole Basis: if one has a perception that p, then it can be the whole basis for knowing that p only if it both has p as part of its content and makes one aware of a truth-maker for p.

I will proceed on the assumption that Whole Basis is correct, although I will

also consider a potential challenge to it below.

The main observation suggesting that there is a tension between High-Level Perception, Moral Knowledge, and Moral Improvement is that sensory perceptual experiences cannot make one aware of truth-makers for propositions about what one should do in a situation. Consider Joan's moral perception and suppose it just is her sensory perceptual experience of the standing woman. Perhaps this experience makes Joan aware of part of the truth-maker for the proposition that she should offer her seat, namely the woman's discomfort. But the whole truth-maker includes more, such as that there is a prima facie duty of beneficence that is not defeated by other features of the situation. The point illustrated by this case seems to generalize. If so, then given Whole Basis, it follows that Moral Knowledge should be qualified: if one has a moral perception that one should ϕ in a situation, then it can be at most a partial basis for knowing that one should ϕ in that situation. The knowledge depends on background beliefs that themselves amount to knowledge. But if this is so, then it is problematic for Moral Improvement, because those background beliefs cannot be corrected by the moral perception that depends on their epistemic support. Surely, however, we do correct our antecedent moral beliefs in light of moral perception: consider McGrath's example of Alice, who initially believes that homosexuality is wrong but then learns through moral perception of her neighbors Bob and Chuck that it is not wrong (see McGrath, 2004).

Let us put the foregoing together into a more explicit puzzle:

(A) Moral perceptions about whether one should φ in a situation are sensory perceptual experiences with 'high-level' content.

(B) Moral perceptions are either whole or partial bases for moral knowledge about whether one should ϕ in a situation.

(C) Moral perceptions can correct background moral beliefs about whether one should φ in a situation.

(D) Moral perceptions are whole bases for moral knowledge about whether one should φ in a situation only if they make one aware of truth-makers for propositions about whether one should φ in a situation.

(E) Sensory perceptual experiences cannot make one aware of truth-makers for propositions about whether one should φ in a situation.

(F) So moral perceptions are not whole bases for moral knowledge about whether one should ϕ in a situation and are epistemically supported by background beliefs about whether one should ϕ in a situation.

(G) But if a moral perception is epistemically supported by background beliefs about whether one should ϕ in a situation, then it cannot cor-

rect those background beliefs.

(H) So either (i) moral perceptions are not sensory perceptual experiences, or (ii) moral perceptions are neither whole nor partial bases for moral knowledge, or (iii) moral perceptions cannot correct background moral beliefs.

(A)—(C) come from High-Level Perception, Moral Knowledge, and Moral Improvement. (D) comes from Whole Basis. (E) records the observations suggested by reflection on examples such as that of Joan's moral perception. (F) follows from (A), (D), and (E). (G) is a plausible claim about epistemic support. And (H) follows from (B), (C), (F), and (G). So, as advertised, there is a tension between High-Level Perception, Moral Knowledge, and Moral Improvement.

I believe that High-Level Perception is the weakest among the three. Before exploring an alternative conception of moral perception, however, I would like to consider an objection to my argument. In his recent book on moral perception, Robert Audi (2013) argues that moral perceptions can give us non-inferential moral knowledge. 'Non-inferential' can be read in two ways. First, it can mean: the knowledge does not depend on your performing the characteristic mental actions associated with making explicit inferences. Second, it can mean: the knowledge does not epistemically depend on anything other than the moral perception itself. If Audi intends the first reading, then our views might be consistent. But if Audi intends the second reading, then our views are inconsistent.

Suppose Audi does intend the second reading. Then he should reject Whole Basis or reject the claim that sensory perceptual experiences cannot make one aware of the relevant truth-makers. It seems to me that Audi would deny Whole Basis. According to Audi a moral perception that one ought to ϕ in a situation can put one in a position to know that one ought to ϕ in a situation by making one aware of the ground of one's obligation to ϕ in that situation. The ground consists of features of the situation that make the obligation apply. So in the case of Joan's moral perception the ground is the standing woman's discomfort, which, for simplicity, we are assuming is an object of Joan's perceptual awareness.

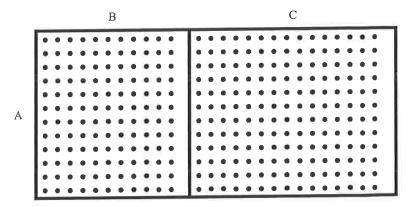
This view is subject to counterexamples. Consider the following scenario. You see that a car is illegally parked by seeing that it is parked next to a fire

hydrant. The fact that the car is illegally parked is grounded in the fact that it is parked next to a fire hydrant. This is the feature of the situation that makes it an instance of illegal parking. Let us assume that the state of affairs of the car being parked next to a fire hydrant is an object of your perceptual awareness. Does it follow, as it should on the view Audi seems to endorse, that your knowledge that the car is illegally parked might be wholly based on your perceptual experience in the scenario? No, it does not. You also have to know the parking laws. If you do not know that parking next to fire hydrants is illegal, then you do not know that the car is illegally parked. The ground-or at least the partial ground of the sort Audi focuses on-is one thing, the truth-maker is another: the truth-maker includes the laws in addition to the car's being parked next to a fire hydrant. Because you are not perceptually aware of that truth-maker, your knowledge that the car is illegally parked depends in part on background beliefs about the laws. Of course, you need not go through some explicit reasoning process in which you mentally rehearse the parking laws to yourself. But this just means the epistemic dependence need not take the form of an explicit inference. There is epistemic dependence on background beliefs nonetheless (cf. Bagnoli, 2011; Kauppinen, 2013).

I should emphasize, however, that this is precisely the model that I think we should avoid, or at least make avoidable, when thinking about moral perception. We do not use our perceptual experiences as of illegally parked cars to correct our background beliefs about the parking laws. The background beliefs are held fixed. But this is not always true about moral perception and background moral beliefs. That is the point encapsulated in Moral Improvement.

3 MORAL PERCEPTION AS LOW-LEVEL INTUITION

Consider the following diagram:



A(B + C) = AB + AC

Observing and reflecting on the diagram brings to light at least two truths. First, the distributive law: A(B + C) = AB + AC. Second, a concrete instance of the distributive law: the number that results from counting B dots then C dots A times is the number that results from counting A dots B times then C times. Consider the following claims about this experience:

- [a] Part of its content is that A(B + C) = AB + AC.
- [b] Part of its content is that the number that results from counting B dots then C dots A times is the number that results from counting A dots B times then C times.
- |c| It makes you intuitively aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that A(B + C) = AB + AC.
- [d] It does not make you perceptually aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that the number that results from counting B dots then C dots A times is the number that results from counting A dots B times then C times.
- [e] It does make you perceptually aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that the diagram is, at least approximately, a concrete instance of the distributive law.

Claims [a] and [b] are about the content of your experience. Claim [c] is about an object of intuitive awareness. There is an abstract state of affairs that makes the distributive law true and, in my view, the kind of experience you have when you reflect on this sort of diagram makes you aware of that state of affairs. I have defended this view elsewhere and will assume it here (see Chudnoff, 2013). Claims [d] and [e] are about the objects of perceptual awareness. The motivation for claim [d] is that there are too many dots to take in at a glance and you do not sit there and count them up. The motivation for [e] is that even though you do not perceptually take in the numbers of dots in the rows and the columns you do perceptually take in the arrangement of those rows and columns in virtue of which the diagram is, at least approximately, a concrete instance of the distribute law. It turns out that this diagram is an exact concrete instance. But that it is so need not be perceptually evident: had a dot been missing and the others shifted about a bit you probably would not have noticed.

The foregoing claims about the contents and objects of the experience suggest the following epistemic claims about it:

- [f] It puts you in a position to know that A(B + C) = AB + AC.
- [g] It puts you in a position to know that the number that results from counting B dots then C dots A times is the number that results from counting A dots B times then C times.
- [h] It has the feature reported in [g] because it has the feature reported in [f].

on in informing you about concrete reality.

Claims [f] and [g] are prima facie plausible. The motivation for claim [h] is that you are not aware of a truth-maker for the concrete claim; rather, you are aware of a truth-maker for the abstract claim and you are aware of a truth-maker for a claim to the effect that the concrete situation at least approximately instantiates the abstract state of affairs. In your experience you learn about concrete reality by grasping it as an approximate instantiation of abstract reality. I will call experiences like this 'low-level intuitions.' They are intuitions because they put you in a position to know truths about abstract reality in a way that mirrors sensory perception. They are low-level because in them your position to know truths about abstract reality is drawn

The key feature of the example that I want to emphasize is this: even though your particular knowledge that the number that results from counting B dots then C dots A times is the number that results from counting A dots B times then C times depends on your general knowledge that A(B+C)=AB+AC, your particular knowledge does not depend on general background beliefs. The same experience puts you in a position to learn about the general and the particular. And although the general has some epistemic priority, this priority does not take the form of epistemic dependence on background beliefs. You need not have entered the situation with a prior belief that A(B+C)=AB+AC. This is characteristic of what I am calling low-level intuitions. In them you learn about concrete particulars by subsuming them under general truths, but you need not have prior belief in the general truths because those general truths themselves are also presented in the intuition.

Consider, then, the view that Joan's moral perception is an example of low-level intuition. This suggests the following claims about it:

- [i] Part of its content is that she is in a position to relieve the standing woman's discomfort.
- [i] Part of its content is that there is a prima facie duty of beneficence.
- [k] It makes her perceptually aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that she is in a position to relieve the standing woman's discomfort.
- [l] It makes her intuitively aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that there is a prima facie duty of beneficence.
- [m] It makes her perceptually aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that there are no, or at least no apparent, defeaters of the prima facie duty of beneficence.

The idea is that Joan's experience presents a general truth about obligation—[j] and [l]—and, in light of that, a particular obligation—[i], [k], and [m]. We can leave open the extent to which her experience rules out the presence of defeaters of the prima facie duty of beneficence. Presumably it rules out the presence of some defeaters. But the experience itself need not rule out all possible defeaters. In that way it might be like your experience of the diagram: the perception itself suggests but does not ensure that the

distributive law applies because it does not rule out the possibility that a dot is missing somewhere.

I would not claim that all examples of moral perception are the way I have described Joan's. Rather, I think some are. The thesis I am inclined to accept is this.

Low-Level Intuition: in some cases, when one has a moral perception that one should ϕ in a situation, it is an intuition—about obligation in general, actions of a kind ϕ is, and situations of a type one is in—that includes the low-level content that one should ϕ in that situation.

This thesis is compatible with the claim that some moral perceptions are mere high-level perceptions. But it is incompatible with High-Level Perception, the thesis that all are. Sometimes we just apply our prior moral beliefs in making perceptual judgments about what we ought to do. But sometimes we see our immediate situation as both illustrating and illuminating moral reality itself. These are the moral perceptions that amount to low-level intuitions. And these are the moral perceptions that enable moral improvement. For when we confront moral reality itself, we can check our prior moral beliefs against how it is now presented to us.

Low-Level Intuition, then, is compatible with Moral Knowledge and Moral Improvement. A moral perception that amounts to low-level intuition can put one in a position to know that one should φ in a situation. This knowledge need not be wholly based on the moral perception, although in some cases, depending on the details, it might be wholly based on the moral perception. Here is why it need not be. Consider Joan and some possible defeaters of the prima facie duty of beneficence. If the standing woman is faking her discomfort, then this is a defeater. Let us suppose Joan is not aware of anything that rules out this defeater. But still she has some background knowledge that is relevant: in general people do not fake. So her knowledge of her particular obligation does depend on *some* background beliefs. Crucially, however, the relevant background beliefs are not about moral principles. So even when background beliefs are involved, a moral perception that amounts to low-level intuition can correct background moral beliefs about whether one should φ in a situation.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with a local observation and a more wide-ranging speculation. The local observation is about the phenomenal contrast argument from the first section. It stalled on two unsupported premises:

(3) John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience contain the same sensory states directed at the woman—and we can always tell the story so that this is the case.

(4) John's overall experience and Joan's overall experience contain different cognitive states directed at the woman—Joan has a moral perception John lacks.

Now we see that if we fill out the details so that Joan's moral perception is the sort that amounts to a low-level intuition, then (3) and (4) are defensible. So at least some moral perceptions can be used in phenomenal contrast arguments for Irreducibility.

The more wide-ranging speculation is that low-level intuitions play a significant role in all sorts of evaluative perception, not just moral perception. The most obvious example other than moral perception is aesthetic perception. In some cases we merely apply already accepted aesthetic standards. In other cases our aesthetic standards are transformed by a new aesthetic perception. I speculate that such cases can be understood as instances of low-level intuition. Less obvious examples of evaluative perception are perceptions of mental states and perceptions of meaning. Plausibly these perceptions also invoke norms: norms or rationality and norms of interpretation. And, just as in the moral and aesthetic cases, our apprehension of the norms themselves can be altered in light of their application to particulars. Again, I speculate that such cases can be understood as instances of low-level intuition.

NOTES

- 1 For further discussion see Chudnoff (2015).
- 2 In this paper I focus on a challenge to (3) and (4) deriving from the idea that moral perception is high-level perception. Another possible challenge derives from the idea that different moral perceptions are associated with different low-level sensory states, perhaps because of differences in attention. If the argument of this paper works, however, then it undermines the alternative challenge, for if differences in moral perception are differences in low-level intuition then they are not just differences in low-level sensory states.
- 3 I take the content that one should φ in a situation as an example throughout, but the points I make in reference to it apply to contents of moral perception more generally.
- 4 Compare non-moral improvement by non-moral perception: if one sees that there are black swans, then this perception might be used to correct one's prior beliefs to the effect that it is not the case that there are black swans.
- 5 Cowan (2013), Kauppinen (2013), and Faraci (forthcoming) develop similar lines of reasoning.
- 6 McGrath (2004) makes a similar point, and Brown (2013) uses it in arguing against general views of philosophical intuition according to which they epistemically depend on background beliefs. See also Bagnoli (2011).

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