

- Blum, Lawrence. “Moral Perception and Particularity.” *Ethics* 101, no. 4 (1991): 701–25.
- Clifton, W. Scott. “Murdochian Moral Perception.” *Journal of Value Inquiry*. 47.2 (2013): 207.
- Coons, Christian. “How to Prove That Some Acts Are Wrong (Without Using Substantive Moral Premises).” *Philosophical Studies*, 2011.
- Cullison, Andrew. “Moral Perception.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2009): 159–75.
- Cuneo, Terence. “Reidian Moral Perception.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2003): 229–58.
- Faraci, David. “A Hard Look at Moral Perception.” *Philosophical Studies*, 2014, 1–18.
- Harman, Gilbert. *The nature of morality: An introduction to ethics*. Oxford University Press 1979.
- McBrayer, Justin P. “Moral Perception and the Causal Objection.” *Ratio* 23, no. 3 (2010): 291–307.
- . “A Limited Defense of Moral Perception.” *Philosophical Studies* 149, no. 3 (2010): 305–20.
- McDowell, John. “Virtue and reason.” *The Monist* 62.3 (1979): 331-350.
- McGrath, Sarah. “Moral Knowledge by Perception.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004): 209–28.
- Murdoch, Iris. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Penguin, 1999.
- Putnam, Hilary. *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy and other essays*. Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Sidgwick, Henry. *The methods of ethics*. Hackett Publishing, 1907.
- Siegel, S. *The contents of visual experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Starkey, C. On the Category of Moral Perception. *Social Theory and Practice*, 32.1 (2006), 75–96.
- Tropman, Elizabeth. “Renewing Moral Intuitionism.” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, no. 4 (2009): 440–63.
- Väyrynen, Pekka. “Doubts about moral perception.” In Anna Bergqvist & Robert Cowan (eds.), *Evaluative Perception*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Taylor & Francis. Chicago, 2011.
- Wright, Jennifer Lyn. “The Role of Moral Perception in Mature Moral Agency.” *Moral Perception* (2008): 1-24.

Notes

1. Thick concepts are one that carry both descriptive and normative components. They are both world-guided and action-guiding. See, for instance, Williams (2011) chapters 7-8.
2. See Putnam (2002), chapter 2
3. Murdoch discusses the relevance of perception to moral philosophy in a number of essays, many of which can be found in Murdoch (1999). Among the admirers I have in mind are Antonaccio (2000). Clifton (2013), Starkey (2006) and Blum (1991),
4. I’ve abstracted these from the cases in Blum (1991).
5. Blum (1991) p. 702
6. Harman (1979) p. 4

Does Everything Flow? A Reply to Sparks

Jonathan R. Goodman

I thank the editors for inviting me to comment on Dr. Sparks’s essay, “Moral Perception and Morally Relevant Perception.” The essay’s central point, which the author defends effectively, is that proponents of the view that moral perception is possible are mistaking the perception of morality for the perception of morally relevant features of a particular event.

In this comment I would like, however, to question whether the distinction between moral perceptions and perceptions of morally relevant features is a necessary one, and to suggest, with a caveat, that the morally relevant features of some event are just the constituents of a moral perception.

Sparks argues that direct perception of moral properties is problematic because these perceptions may preclude people from parsing a circumstance's moral from non-moral properties. "Sensitive moral agents," as Sparks puts it, will not be able to explain why one action is right and another is wrong if these agents cannot distinguish the morally relevant features that constitute a particular moral judgment.

One factor not discussed closely in this essay, which may be relevant to this debate, is whether moral perceptions can be incorrect. If I judge, knowing all the relevant moral factors of a circumstance, that some act is unjust, it is open to question whether my judgment can be wrong. If, however, one adopts the cognitivist view that sentences expressing moral content are true or false, Sparks's complaint seems valid: the sensitive moral agent, although educated in what is good, cannot explain why a particular action is right or wrong, assuming direct moral perceptions are possible. The capacity for perceiving moral properties suggests that the non-moral features of a particular action are irrelevant when making a moral judgment.

But what if the truth-value of a sentence that may determine moral judgments is not fixed? Take, in a non-morally relevant example, Charles Travis's question of whether painting an evergreen tree's leaves gold leads to the truth or falsity of the proposition, "those leaves are gold."¹ In his defense of radical contextualism, Travis contends that it is possible to utter the same sentence with the same meaning on two different occasions – though on the first occasion the statement is true and on the second the statement is false. What determines the truth-value, according to Travis, is the occasion on which the statement is made.

In *Everything Flows*, Vasily Grossman describes how the Soviet State was so effective at determining how its citizens thought and behaved.² Of a particular informer who is responsible for the imprisonment of hundreds of fellow Russians, Grossman says:

The faith that lived in him was another faith: faith in the mercilessness of the chastising hand of the great Stalin. In him lived the unhesitating obedience of the believer...In some ways he disliked his dark work — except that it was his duty!... 'Remember,' his mentors used to tell him, 'that you have neither father nor mother, neither sisters nor brothers. You have only the Party.'

When, however, Stalin's reign of terror ended after his death, Grossman describes how the beliefs of those previously living in his regime adopted vastly different views about what was right or good: in the eyes of the State and the people, informants were now villains, not heroes. How should we determine the truth-value of the statement, "the informer is guilty," when uttered by a state official of the Stalinist regime on the one hand, and of the post-Stalin era on the other?

The answer would not, according to Travis, lie in whatever the informer may be guilty of, but rather how the occasion on which the sentence is uttered determines whether the statement is true or false. We can retain the same meaning for each of these words, and yet whether the phrase is uttered before or after the death of Stalin affects whether it is true.

This possibility suggests that the occasion on which a sentence is uttered may define the non-morally relevant factors from which we make moral judgments. Perceiving moral properties might then be indistinguishable from perceiving the particulars of an occasion on which a moral judgment is made: if the property is not fixed, and “flows” with the changing context, then to perceive a moral property may be to perceive the relevant factors from which a moral judgment is drawn.

If, furthermore, becoming a sensitive moral agent is part of acculturation, can we rightly judge the informer raised under Stalin’s reign who denounces those he believes are threats to his way of life? If these totalitarian beliefs were sufficiently instilled in members of the Soviet State, it seems just as plausible for an informer to rely on the “infallibility of his soul” when denouncing others as it does for Tolstoy’s Levin when he acts generously towards his serfs.

If everything flows, can a moral property be more than the union of the relevant factors at whatever time a moral judgment is made?

This argument is of course valid only if we accept the possibility that moral properties are not fixed, and that statements with moral content do not have fixed truth-values. It may nonetheless be a helpful line of thinking for Sparks to consider.

References

1. Travis, C. 1997. “Pragmatics.” In B. Hale and C. Wright eds. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
2. Grossman, V. 2011. *Everything Flows*. Translated by R. Chandler. London: Vintage Classic.



Teleological Concepts in Evolutionary Theory Applied to Human-Directed Evolution

James S. Freeman

How will moral sense, as a combination of genetically evolved and conditioned traits and behaviors and culturally evolved and conditioned beliefs, values and practices, respond to the emerging possibilities of advanced technology? What role can philosophy play in shaping the current debate, and are our present philosophical tools and discourses adequate to the task? Perhaps it is time to borrow from the recent debates over evolution within the history of science, and re-examine some philosophical views on nature and teleology to see what application they might have to a rapidly changing world. This paper looks specifically to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Judgment*, with its curious pairing of aesthetics and teleology, and the work of William James, primarily *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, to provide non-theistic forms of teleology, fully supportive of evolutionary theory, that can be employed as a framework to discuss and critique current technological projects, which present existential challenges

such behavior isn't valuable. It's important not to see philosophic altruism and biological altruism as competitor accounts of a single concept. If one did, then one couldn't avoid Price's despair.

Likewise, signaling altruism doesn't compete with philosophic or biologic altruism. Keeping them separate is essential to asking certain normative questions. Are my reasons to act altruistically (or to intend to do so) derived from my reasons to signal altruism? It's also essential for asking certain biological questions: Is the biological benefit of altruistic behavior (or intention) a function of the biological benefit of signaling altruism? These are interesting and important questions raised by Goodman's paper and they shouldn't be lost amid claims about the insufficiency of biological or philosophical accounts of altruism.



Moral Perception and Morally Relevant Perception

Jacob Sparks

You might bear witness to some injustice, but can you witness the injustice itself? At first glance, it's tempting to say "yes." Sometimes we see things that provoke an immediate judgement that some act is wrong just as we sometimes see things that provoke the immediate judgement that e.g. the book is red or that our friend is angry. It seems like we *perceive* the injustice just as we *perceive* the redness or the anger. Natural as that position is, some reflection might give us pause. Do we really *see* injustice? Isn't it more accurate to say that we *see* e.g. the innocent man being punished, and then we *infer* that what is happening is unjust?

The dispute, between those who think that there is a genuine kind of moral perception and those who think that no such kind of perception is possible, is the topic of this paper. Many authors dismiss the idea of moral perception with little fanfare. As an initial example, consider this passage from Sidgwick:

[T]hough probably all moral agents have experience of such particular intuitions [i.e. moral perceptions], and though they constitute a great part of the moral phenomena of most minds, comparatively few are so thoroughly satisfied with them, as not to feel a need of some further moral knowledge even from a strictly practical point of view...[S]erious doubts are aroused as to the validity of each man's particular moral judgements: and we are led to endeavour to set these doubts at rest by appealing to general rules...(Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Bk I, Chapter VIII, §3 p. 100)

There is a distinction implicit in Sidgwick's remarks between immediate moral judgements which might *arise* from perception and perceptual moral knowledge. Sidgwick rightfully grants that sometimes we find ourselves with strong moral judgements that appear to arise immediately, i.e. they do not seem to be the product of any reasoning process. We simply see what's going on and we think, "that's wrong!" But admitting that phenomenon does not mean, according to Sidgwick, that we have per-

ceptual *knowledge*. Sidgwick's reason seems to rest on his 'deductivist' model of moral knowledge. To *justify* a moral belief, we would have to introduce a general moral rule and subsume the case in question under that rule. Defenders of moral perception reject this assumption and often emphasize the Aristotelian point that there are no codifiable moral rules that have anything approaching a universal scope and that the idea that we need to find general rules to justify our particular beliefs or actions shows an impoverished understanding of the richness and complexity of the moral life.

Here is another case where the possibility of moral perception is quickly dismissed:

We don't directly detect actual instances of right and wrong in our experience...Instead, we often conclude that particular acts are wrong in virtue of some empirically detectable feature; for example, because it causes pain, involves deceit, or violates an agreement (etc.). But it is unclear how we could have empirical grounds for concluding that these features are wrong-makers given that we do not observe the actual co-instantiation of these features and wrongness. (Coons, 2010 p. 85)

Coons assumes that there is a sharp distinction between moral and non-moral properties and that while non-moral properties can be detected in experience, moral properties cannot. When he claims that pain, deceit, or being in violation of some agreement are things that we can detect empirically, but that we cannot use the senses to judge that any particular instantiation of these properties is a wrong-maker, he is implicitly relying on the claim that 'thick' moral terms¹ can always be decomposed into a moral and a non-moral component. We can perceive deceit, he says, but not the fact that this particular deception makes our action wrong; and hence he must think deception—even when wrong – can be identified independently of recognizing its wrongness.

Defenders of moral perception usually deny that it is possible to enact the decomposition that Coons requires. Putnam puts the point by saying that facts and values are entangled: there is not a sharp distinction between non-moral concepts and moral ones. For Putnam and others who deny the distinction, the state of mind we are in when we judge, for instance, that some act is cowardly is not analyzable into (a) judging that it involves giving into fear and (b) judging that this is wrong.² If such a decomposition were possible, then it would be possible to pick out instances of cowardly acts without sharing the evaluative standpoint which condemns them. But, according to this line of thinking, that is not plausible. It seems, instead, that one grasps instances of cowardliness in a more holistic and direct way.

Some defenders of moral perception are motivated by the inadequacy of other accounts of moral knowledge. They doubt that there are self-evident moral truths, or that reasoning from non-moral beliefs can lead to moral knowledge, or that coherence considerations are sufficient for knowing what is right and wrong. Evaluation of these last-man-standing arguments would require assessment of all the other ways people have tried to account for moral knowledge and would, in addition, require some argument against moral skepticism. This paper will instead focus on arguments for moral perception that start from reflection on the qualities needed to be a sensitive moral thinker. The moral life, it is claimed, involves much more than reasoning from a priori

principles. Even someone possessed of all the true moral principles would need certain perceptual capacities to apply those principles and to see how all the morally relevant features of the situation balance off against each other. Additionally, when we think about the experiences of mature moral agents, they don't seem to require much reasoning. The way they respond to morally loaded situations is fast and automatic – like an expert athlete or artist. A well developed perceptual capacity seems like a more reliable guide to what is right and wrong than our feeble and fallible reasoning abilities.

This position gets expressed by Tolstoy's protagonist, Konstantin Dmitrievitch Levin when, near the end of *Anna Karenina*, he reflects on how trusting the 'infallible judge in his soul,' has allowed him to manage his estate well, with sensitivity to fine distinctions that reason would have difficulty defending.

He knew he must hire laborers as cheaply as possible; but to hire men under bond, paying them in advance at less than the current rate of wages, was what he must not do, even though it was very profitable. Selling straw to the peasants in times of scarcity of provender was what he might do, even though he felt sorry for them; but the tavern and the pothouse must be put down, though they were a source of income. Felling timber must be punished as severely as possible, but he could not exact forfeits for cattle being driven onto his fields; and though it annoyed the keeper and made the peasants not afraid to graze their cattle on his land, he could not keep their cattle as a punishment...

Reasoning had brought him to doubt, and prevented him from seeing what he ought to do and what he ought not. When he did not think, but simply lived [and, we might add, *looked*], he was continually aware of the presence of an infallible judge in his soul, determining which of two possible courses of action was the better and which was the worse, and as soon as he did not act rightly, he was at once aware of it.

Levin's knowledge of how to manage his estate has a number of important features that suggest he is *perceiving* what he ought to do. His beliefs are *trustworthy*: It would be strange to say he was seeing what he ought to do if he rarely got it right. They are *immediate in a phenomenal sense*: Levin does not have the experience of concluding what he ought to do on the basis of other beliefs. Relatedly, his beliefs about how to manage his estate have a *passivity* characteristic of perception; forming these judgements is *easy* or *automatic*. His knowledge is also *immediate in a justificatory sense*: He can't give reasons for why he ought to act as he does – he just sees it. Finally, perhaps because the knowledge is immediate in these two senses, any reasoning Levin does attempt about these matters leads him into doubt and confusion.

Like Levin, many of us have the capacity to make these kinds of trustworthy immediate judgements about what we ought to do in some more or less circumscribed area of conduct. Our expertise might not be in managing country estates, but when it comes to areas where we have sufficient practice – moving about in some familiar social context, raising a child, or treating guests hospitably – we just know what to do in an easy and automatic way. Too much reasoning gets in the way. What separates those who act well in some such area from those who fail to act well does seem to be the exist-

ence of a sufficiently honed sense.

There is something clearly right about these claims, but they should not be understood to imply that there is a genuine kind of moral perception. Though Levin may require a perceptual capacity to manage his estate well, it need not be understood as a capacity to perceive moral properties. Defenders of moral perception often fail to distinguish carefully between moral perception and what I will call *morally relevant* perception. Though certain perceptual capacities are no doubt *relevant* to good moral reasoning, they do not amount to a kind of distinctively moral perception. Moreover, if there were moral perception, the capacity to perceive *morally relevant properties* would be much less important than it actually is.

There are two senses in which perception and perceptual capacities can be *relevant* for moral thought and action. Both are found in the writings of Iris Murdoch and in many of her admiring commentators.³

The first sense involves the capacity to perceive the morally relevant non-moral features of the world so that these features can enter into your deliberations. One must (1) have the proper (morally relevant) non-moral concepts, (2) have the wherewithal to *notice* when relevant non-moral features are present, (3) be disposed to *attend* to these relevant non-moral features, (4) appreciate *the relevance* of these features and, (5) be free of any biases, distortions, or distractions that might prevent those features from entering into your deliberation in the proper way.⁴ We might say that, in this sense, perception matters because it provides the *ingredients* for moral thinking and deliberation. Suppose, for instance, that you are riding a crowded train when a person gets on who needs to sit down. If you lack the concept NEEDS TO SIT DOWN, or if, having the concept, you lack the wherewithal to notice that this person needs to sit down or if, though you notice you don't really pay any attention to the fact that she needs to sit down or if, though you pay attention you don't appreciate the fact that her need to sit down gives you a reason to offer your seat or if, appreciating that fact, you think that your comfort is more important than her need, then you won't be in a position to reason well about what you ought to do. Not all of these steps to good deliberation are properly called 'perceptual.' We wouldn't, for instance, normally call familiarity with a concept a perceptual capacity. But, as the example illustrates, morally sensitive persons often just see what's going on and then know what they ought to do.

The other sense in which perception is morally relevant is illustrated by Murdoch's case of the Mother-in-Law:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D...unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile...M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume...that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout...Time passes...M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.'...D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay; not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful,

and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M's outward behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters. (Murdoch 1999 p. 312-3)

M doesn't come to see *new* features of D that she had previously ignored. Rather, her accomplishment is that she has come to see D *in a certain light*, or *with a loving gaze*. It is similar to the case of someone who with some effort comes to see the duckrabbit as a duck. Nothing new is seen, but there is a new way of seeing. This kind of perception, according to Murdoch, is a morally relevant *goal* and is something worth aiming at, quite apart from how it affects our actions. Sometimes Murdoch even suggests that coming to see other people and the world at large *correctly or lovingly* is the only goal of the moral life and that notion of 'exercising the will to act rightly' is a philosopher's fiction. But whether or not we accept this more extreme view, we can recognize that the mother-in-law has accomplished something morally significant and that many of us wish to accomplish similar things in our own lives.

What is important about these cases of morally relevant perception is that neither needs to be understood as the perception of moral properties. Both cases were specifically concerned with perception of certain non-moral properties, either as a precursor to moral deliberation and action or as a morally significant goal in itself. But many who defend the idea of moral perception will often cite the importance of these morally relevant kinds of perception as evidence that we can perceive moral properties. They mistakenly take the reasonable claim that perceptual capacities are relevant to moral thinking to support the much less reasonable claim that we can perceive moral properties themselves.

Take Lawrence Blum's example of John and Joan, who are riding a train together.⁵ When a lady carrying heavy bags enters the train, Joan but not John notices her discomfort. Since Joan is able to perceive a morally relevant feature of the situation (the lady's discomfort), she is better able to make a decision about giving up her seat. She has a morally relevant perceptual capacity that John lacks. Blum puts this point by saying "a morally significant aspect of situations facing John fails to be salient to him, and this is a defect in his character." But, almost immediately, Blum reframes the point by saying that "[John] misses something of the moral reality confronting him." In a sense, this is true. John doesn't know that he ought to give up his seat. But the reason he doesn't grasp this moral fact isn't because he fails to see his obligation, it's because he fails to see the woman's distress. It's not the moral reality that John is 'missing,' it's the morally relevant reality. The perceptual capacity he lacks isn't a capacity to see the propriety of giving up his seat; it's the capacity to see that the woman needs to sit down.

In another of Blum's cases, Theresa, an administrator, is dealing with Julio, an employee, who has a painful disability that requires accommodation. Theresa fails to fully appreciate Julio's disability and his pain and therefore fails to take the needed steps to accommodate him. Blum writes that "Theresa is failing to perceive or acknowledge something morally significant." One paragraph later, however, Blum characterizes the same shortcoming of Theresa's as "the failure to be in touch with part of the moral reality." Again, we needn't understand the situation as a failure of moral perception. There is available a perfectly good explanation of Theresa's shortcoming that only

involves her failing to perceive or appreciate some morally relevant aspects of reality.

The same pattern – of moving from claims about a capacity to perceive certain (morally relevant) non-moral features to claims about a capacity to perceive the moral features themselves – recurs a number of times in the literature. Many recognize a difference in perceptual abilities between virtuous and vicious characters, or between moral experts and moral novices, and then claim that the only (or best) way to explain the difference is by differing capacities to perceive moral properties.

Werner (2014), for instance, gives a *phenomenal contrast argument* for the claim that moral properties can be part of the contents of experience. Such arguments involve imagining two very similar cases of perception that, intuitively, are phenomenally distinct. One argues that a certain property is perceptible via inference to the best explanation of the phenomenal contrast. To illustrate the pattern of argument, Werner cites an example involving the perception of the property being-a-pine-tree.

Suppose you have never seen a pine tree before and are hired to cut down all the pine trees in a grove containing trees of many different sorts. Someone points out to you which trees are pine trees. Some weeks pass, and your disposition to distinguish the pine trees from the others improves. Eventually, you can spot the pine trees immediately: they become visually salient to you...Gaining this recognitional disposition is reflected in a phenomenological difference between the visual experiences had before and those had after the recognitional disposition was fully developed. (Siegel 2010 p. 100)

Intuitively, what it's like to see a pine tree when you are a novice is different from what it's like to see the pine tree after you've had some experience in the forest. To argue that being-a-pine-tree is a property that we can perceive directly, you simply claim that what best explains the phenomenal difference is that when you are experienced, but not when you are a novice, the property being-a-pine-tree is part of the contents of your perceptual experience.

Werner applies this pattern of argument to try to show that moral properties can be part of the contents of our experiences. We are to imagine two individuals rounding a corner and encountering Harman's famous case of children burning a cat.⁶ One of the persons, it is stipulated, is an emotionally empathic dysfunctional individual (an EEDI) called Pathos, who lacks a certain kind of affective empathy. The other is a perfectly normal person called Norma. Intuitively, the two individuals will have different phenomenal experiences on observing the scene. What explains the difference? Werner says it is the fact that Norma, but not Pathos, has the property *being bad* as part of the contents of her experience.

But why should we think it is a *moral* property figuring in the contents of experience that explains the phenomenal difference? Pathos will probably not represent the cat's pain in the same way as Norma. Even if he recognizes it in some sense, he will not *feel* it in the same way. Nor will he represent the callousness of the children in the same way as Norma. Aren't those differences sufficient to explain the phenomenal difference?

Werner, in making the case that Norma's experiential state involves the representation of badness, writes:

Norma's experiential state meets three conditions that we would standardly count as sufficient for a state's representing some property F. First...Norma has developed a disposition to be in this particular experiential state which more or less reliably tracks badness. Second, and relatedly, Norma's relevantly associated phenomenology is counterfactually correlated with badness (or at least a particular type of badness) in her local environment. Finally, Norma is disposed to form moral beliefs based on experiential states of this kind...It would appear then that we have some good preliminary reasons in favor [of the perception of moral properties] as the best explanation of the contrast in question. (Werner 2014 p. 10)

But those three conditions are *not sufficient* for Norma's experiential state to count as representing a moral property. I might get a certain feeling in my leg whenever the pressure drops and rain is likely. I might have a disposition to be in this particular experiential state that tracks rain-tomorrow, such a state might be counterfactually correlated with rain-tomorrow, and I might be disposed to form beliefs about rain-tomorrow on the basis of similar experiential states. But that doesn't show that I'm *perceiving* the property rain-tomorrow. That would be to confuse the perception of properties that are relevant for my judgement about rain-tomorrow with my perception of rain-tomorrow itself. Similarly, Werner is here confusing the perception of morally relevant properties with the perception of moral properties themselves.

Later, in considering whether or not a difference in the perception of non-moral properties (in this case being-a-cat-in-pain) can best explain the difference between Norma and Pathos, Werner writes:

The problem with this explanation is that there is no reason to suppose that Pathos fails to perceive the property of being-a-cat-in-pain if we already suppose that Norma does. And this is what would be required to generate a phenomenal contrast. As noted above, eedis are not impaired in their ability to perceive the pain or suffering of others. Nor are they impaired in their ability to perceive any other non-moral properties. Since eedis are not impaired in their ability to perceive most non-moral properties, the explanation given with respect to being-a-cat-in-pain will extend to other alternative explanations of this third sort. (Werner 2014 p. 17)

The issue here is that Werner fails to recognize the more subtle features of morally relevant perception that we listed at the beginning of this section. There is reason to suppose that being-a-cat-in-pain fails to enter into Pathos' thinking in the way we would hope, either because he fails to attend to that feature of the scenario, or because he fails to recognize the moral relevance of that property, or because his thinking is distorted in some other way. That's all consistent with Pathos being able to see that the cat is in pain. If we fully appreciate how perception can be morally relevant, we needn't assume that it's a difference in moral perception *proper* that explains the phenomenal contrast between Normal and Pathos.

As a third and final example of this pattern of argument, consider this passage from

Jennifer Wright:

Mature moral agents know, perhaps implicitly, to what they should attend in order to locate the morally relevant facts and features and then form appropriate moral responses. Although the mature moral agent is confronted with the same situation as other moral agents, often what she sees (hears, etc.) and judges on the basis of her refined moral perception is very different. So, it is only to be expected that she may see that an action is cruel or unjust while others, such as the moral novice, may not. (Wright 2008 p. 17)

Wright explicitly compares mature moral agency to expertise in other realms: just as the chess master can see the superiority of some particular position and can move accordingly or the mountain man can see subtle features of the landscape and can choose the right path, the mature moral agent can see, for instance, that the current topic of conversation is embarrassing to one of the discussants and can alter the discussion accordingly. That much is unobjectionable. But notice how, in the passage quoted, Wright begins by claiming that mature moral agents know how to locate the *morally relevant facts* and ends by claiming that the mature moral agents *see* cruelty or injustice.

One may defend the authors above by claiming that the distinction between moral and non-moral properties is not sharp, and that therefore there isn't anything wrong with slipping from the claim that mature and sensitive moral agents can perceive discomfort to the claim that they can perceive cruelty to the claim that they can perceive injustice, badness or wrongness.

There are two responses to this attempted defense. The first is to grant that there is not a sharp distinction, and to claim that even so it is a mistake to reason from the claim that we can perceive morally relevant properties to the claim that we can perceive the moral properties themselves. Consider, for instance, the difference between seeing that there are 3 books on a shelf and seeing that there are 300 books on a shelf. It is clear to me that I can see the 3 books on the shelf, but 'seeing' the 300 requires, for most people, counting them up. There may be no sharp distinction between those numbers of books that I can see directly and those that I cannot see directly, but that doesn't mean it is right to reason from the claim that I can see 3 to the claim that I can see 300.

The second response is to simply make the distinction between moral and non-moral properties sharp. In one popular formulation, moral properties are 'reason implying.' To judge that some action is wrong, for instance, implies that there is a decisive reason against doing it. To judge that some state of affairs is good implies that there is some reason to bring it about. 'Wrong' and 'good' and other terms can also be taken in a non-moral sense, to mean roughly 'what others judge to be wrong' or 'what others judge to be good.' Terms like 'cruel' or 'unjust' also have both moral and non-moral senses, depending on whether or not ascription of the property implies the existence of reasons. Once the distinction is sharpened in this way, we can say that the authors above are reasoning from the claim that one can perceive *cruelty in the non-moral sense* to the claim that one can perceive *cruelty in the moral sense*. But just because I can see the features of a situation that might imply the existence of reasons,

that doesn't mean I can literally *see* the implication itself.

The authors we've been discussing all think that an account of moral knowledge that leans heavily on a distinctively moral form of perception can better capture the experiences of mature and sensitive moral agents. What I have been trying to show is that we needn't posit a capacity to perceive moral properties to make sense of their examples. But there is one additional thing to notice about the aspirations of these authors. If it turned out that we could perceive moral properties, then our ability to perceive morally relevant properties would be much less important than it is normally taken to be. The central and least controversial way in which perception can be morally relevant is by supplying the materials we need to deliberate and act well. But, if we could just *see* the injustice of a certain action then we wouldn't need to see the features that make the action unjust. In the same way, if we could just see that it is going to rain tomorrow, we wouldn't need to be able to detect empirically all the things that are normally taken to be evidence for upcoming rain. The ability to perceive moral properties directly would provide a kind of shortcut that would make the perception of morally relevant properties extraneous.

This, I'd like to suggest, is an unwelcome result. The relationship between moral properties and the non-moral properties on which they are consequent is unlike the relationship between, for instance, a property like 'being angry' and the microphysical properties on which it is consequent. If someone were to judge that you were angry without an awareness of the microphysical properties on which your anger is consequent, that wouldn't be at all problematic. But if someone were to judge that you were, for instance, cowardly without awareness of the non-moral properties on which that moral property is consequent that *would* be problematic *even if* we grant that they really do perceive your cowardliness directly.

Maybe the best way to see why it's problematic is to think about the ways the following conversation might resolve. Someone – maybe a romantic partner – says, "You're the best." And you ask, "Why am I the best?" If they have an answer – you're so considerate, you supported me in this way, you exhibited this or that admirable quality, you did this excellent deed – then all is well and good. They know what they're talking about. But suppose they can't give a reason. They just see it. How does that feel?

Suppose Joan perceives that she ought to give up her seat on the train without noticing the elderly lady's need to sit down. Suppose Levin knows that he ought not hire men under bond, but he can't say what it is about hiring men under bond that makes it ill-advised. Something isn't right. Sensitive moral thinkers should be sensitive to a broad array of non-moral facts, and they should be able to say why various actions are right and others wrong. But the thesis that we can perceive moral properties seems to controvert this fact. No doubt perception is morally relevant in a variety of important ways, but this does not mean we perceive moral properties.

Bibliography

- Antonaccio, M. . *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Audi, Robert. *Moral Perception*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

January 2018
Volume 13, Issue 1

ASEBL Journal

EDITOR

Gregory F. Tague, Ph.D.

GUEST CO-EDITOR

Clayton Shoppa, Ph.D.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Divya Bhatnagar, Ph.D.

Kristy Biolsi, Ph.D.

Alison Dell, Ph.D.

Tom Dolack, Ph.D.

Wendy Galgan, Ph.D.

Joe Keener, Ph.D.

Eric Luttrell, Ph.D.

Riza Öztürk, Ph.D.

Eric Platt, Ph.D.

Anja Müller-Wood, Ph.D.

SCIENCE CONSULTANT

Kathleen A. Nolan, Ph.D.

EDITORIAL INTERN

Vukasin Petrovic

ASEBL Journal
Copyright©2018
E-ISSN: 1944-401X
publisher@ebibliotekos.com
www.asebl.blogspot.com

Member, *Council of Editors
of Learned Journals*

Association for the Study of
(Ethical Behavior)•(Evolutionary Biology) in Literature
St. Francis College, Brooklyn Heights, N.Y.

THIS ISSUE FEATURES

Papers from the Moral Sense Colloquium III
Held at St. Francis College, Brooklyn, 2 June 2017

(To Navigate to Articles, Click on Author's Last Name)

ACADEMIC ESSAYS BY PHILOSOPHERS

† Clayton Shoppa, "Neurobiology, Intention and Decision." p. 3

Comment by David C. Lahti. p. 7

† Jonathan R. Goodman, "The Importance of Practical Understanding for Altruistic Behavior." p. 10

Comment by Jacob Sparks. p. 17

† Jacob Sparks, "Moral Perception and Morally Relevant Perception." p. 19

Comment by Jonathan R. Goodman. p. 28

† James S. Freeman, "Teleological Concepts in Evolutionary Theory Applied to Human-Directed Evolution." p. 30

Comment by Clayton Shoppa. p. 39

A BIOLOGIST'S REFLECTION ON CULTURAL EVOLUTION

† Kathleen Nolan, "From Leviathan to Saint: When and Why Did Our Feelings About Whales Change?" p. 41

Comment by Ian S. Maloney. p. 48

Contributors, p. 50

Although this is an open-access journal where papers and articles are freely disseminated across the internet for personal or academic use, the rights of individual authors as well as those of the journal and its editors are nonetheless asserted: no part of the journal can be used for commercial purposes whatsoever without the express written consent of the editor.

Cite as: *ASEBL Journal*