

**A DEFENSE OF MORAL PERCEPTION**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

**A DEFENSE OF MORAL PERCEPTION**

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A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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*for Anna*

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# ANALYTIC TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **Abstract**

## **Chapter 1: Defending Moral Perception**

### **1.0 Introduction**

*I make a distinction between general and topical epistemology and introduce moral epistemology.*

### **1.1 Motivations for Moral Epistemology**

*Moral epistemology is important because it is important to us that our moral beliefs are true and yet there are unique concerns about the epistemic status of moral beliefs.*

### **1.2 My View**

*My thesis is that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. I make a distinction between perceiving and perceiving as and argue that the latter is necessary for moral perception. I show that there are two senses of 'moral experience' and 'moral perception', and I indicate which of each is relevant for my thesis. I distinguish my view from related views in the contemporary literature.*

### **1.3 Motivation for My View**

*The thesis that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual (A) is faithful to the phenomenology of moral experience, (B) provides a satisfactory solution to moral skepticism, (C) has strengths over rationalist accounts of moral epistemology, and (D) provides a prima facie defense of reflective equilibrium.*

### **1.4 Assumptions and the Argument**

*I assume that (A) we have moral beliefs (i.e. non-cognitivism is false), (B) perception is at least sometimes sufficient for knowledge (i.e. perceptual knowledge skepticism is false), and (C) there are objective moral facts (i.e. moral realism is true). The central argument of the work is as follows: moral perception occurs and since perception is generally a source of knowledge, at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.*

## **Chapter 2: Moral Perceptual Experience**

### **2.0 Introduction**

*The goal of this chapter is to show that the internal constraints on perception are met in putative cases of moral perception.*

## **2.1 Perceptual Experience**

*I draw a distinction between perception and perceptual experience, and I provide examples of modern and contemporary philosophers who claim that the latter is necessary for the former. For this reason, I stipulate that the internal constraint on perceiving that X is F just is having a perceptual experience as if X is F.*

## **2.2 Moral Perceptual Experience**

*I offer an argument by analogy to show that moral perceptual experiences are possible. Putative cases of moral perceptual experience are like our everyday perceptual experiences in that they produce immediate belief (with moral content), they essentially include qualia, and they are given to the subject.*

### **2.3.0 Objections to the Possibility of Moral Perceptual Experience**

*In this section I entertain various ways of objecting to the argument by analogy presented in §2.2.*

#### **2.3.1 No High Order Representation**

*One might object to the argument from analogy in §2.2 by denying that perceptual experiences can represent any high order properties, and since moral properties are high order properties, moral perceptual experiences are impossible. I show that the central motivation for this objection—a view known as content externalism—either fails to support the objection or else is impotent to show that one cannot have perceptual moral knowledge.*

#### **2.3.2 No Moral Representation**

*One might object to the argument from analogy in §2.2 by denying that putative moral perceptual experiences are relevantly similar to the paradigm cases. The crucial difference is that there is no way that moral properties look, and looking some way or other is a necessary condition for representation. I show that this argument commits the fallacy of equivocation on the word ‘look’.*

### **2.4.0 Moral Representation**

*I set the stage for an argument for the conclusion that perceptual experiences can represent moral properties by noting that several contemporary philosophers allow that other normative properties such as belonging, good and bad are representable in experience.*

#### **2.4.1 Discovering the Content of Perceptual Experience**

*I canvas several contemporary methodologies for determining the content of a perceptual experience, and I show that either the*



*procedure allows for moral content or else shows that perceptual content that P is not necessary for perceptual knowledge that P.*

### **2.4.2 An Argument for Moral Content**

*I provide a positive argument for the conclusion that at least some perceptual experiences represent moral properties. Since background conditions often affect the phenomenology of an experience, and this change in phenomenology is often accounted for by positing a change in content, I conclude that since background moral beliefs can affect the phenomenology of a perceptual experience, this provides a reason to think that perceptual experiences can represent moral properties.*

## **Chapter 3: Moral Perception**

### **3.0 Introduction**

*The goal of this chapter is to show that the external constraints on perception are met in putative cases of moral perception.*

### **3.1 External Constraints on Perception**

*There are two external constraints on perception: S perceives that X is F only if (i) X is F (the factive condition) and (ii) S's perceptual experience as if X is F is appropriately caused (the causal condition).*

#### **3.2.0 Causation and Perception**

*I assume that the factive condition on perception is met in putative cases of moral perception. In the following sections I shall argue that the causal condition is met regardless of whether or not moral properties turn out to be secondary natural properties, non-secondary natural properties, or non-natural properties.*

#### **3.2.1 Moral Properties as Secondary Natural Properties**

*If moral properties are secondary properties, there is no principled objection to thinking that putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition. However, this view of moral properties is plagued by a relativity that can only be avoided by stipulating that only certain individuals be in a position to perceive moral properties, and this stipulation leaves it an open question whether normal humans meet that condition.*

#### **3.2.2 Moral Properties as Non-Secondary Natural Properties**

*If moral properties are natural properties, there is no principled objection to thinking that putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition. This is because natural properties are the kind of properties that can enter into causal relations with our perceptual faculties.*

### **3.2.3 Moral Properties as Non-Natural Properties**

*If moral properties are non-natural properties, there is no principled objection to thinking that putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition. This is because the causal condition on perception ought to be understood as a requirement of non-accidentality, and the correlation between non-natural moral properties and moral perceptual experiences is suitably non-accidental.*

## **Chapter 4: The Epistemology of Moral Perception**

### **4.0 Introduction**

*Perceiving that X is F is not sufficient for knowing that X is F. However, I argue that at least some putative cases of moral perception are sufficient for moral knowledge on four contemporary accounts of perceptual knowledge.*

### **4.1 Justified Belief and Moral Perception**

*Whether or not moral perception is ever sufficient for moral knowledge, I show that it is sufficient for justified moral belief on two contemporary accounts of justification.*

### **4.2 Indirect Realism and Moral Perception**

*I explain Laurence Bonjour's indirect realist view of perceptual knowledge, and I argue that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on his account. The lynchpin of this project is showing that moral facts can play a role in the best explanation of the existence and character of our perceptual experiences.*

### **4.3 Direct Realism and Moral Perception**

*I explain Fred Dretske's direct realist view of perceptual knowledge, and I argue that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on his account. The crucial portion of the project shows that in at least some cases moral perceptual experiences are sensitive to moral facts.*

### **4.4 Evidentialism and Moral Perception**

*I explain Matthias Steup's evidentialist view of perceptual knowledge, and I argue that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on his account. Since Steup's view requires a presumptive reliability constraint on perceptual justification, I argue that agents can come to have good evidence about their reliability of detecting moral properties.*

#### **4.5 Proper Functionalism and Moral Perception**

*I explain Alvin Plantinga's proper functionalist view of perceptual knowledge, and I argue that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on his account. The essential argument of this section shows that humans have cognitive systems that are designed to produce true moral beliefs.*

#### **4.6 The Argument from Disagreement & Perceptual Moral Knowledge**

*In some cases, our awareness of disagreement about P among our peers gives us a reason to withhold believing that P. I show that disagreement about moral matters would not be surprising even if I am correct that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.*

#### **Afterword: The Limits of Perception**

*I briefly explore the limits of perception and suggest that there is a principled way to show that moral perception is possible without allowing other putative forms of perception such as religious or modal perception.*

#### **Bibliography**

#### **Vita for Justin P. McBrayer**

## ABSTRACT

How do we acquire moral knowledge? Contemporary moral epistemology offers various competing answers: by intuition, by *a priori* reasoning, by reflective equilibrium, etc. I offer a different answer: by perception. I defend the possibility of moral perception and the contentious view that at least some of our moral knowledge is perceptual knowledge. Moral knowledge, on my view, can be a *posteriori*.

The first part of the dissertation is spent establishing the possibility of moral perception. For a subject to perceive that something is the case, several conditions must be met. Some of these conditions are internal to the subject in the sense that they are accessible to the subject's consciousness. For example, the subject must be in an appropriate mental state, what I call a *perceptual experience*. If it is not possible for a subject to have a mental state that represents a given property, then it is not possible for that subject to perceive that the property in question is instantiated. I provide an analysis of the internal constraints on perception, and I show that putative cases of moral perception meet each condition in the analysis. In particular, it is possible for moral properties to be represented in the perceptual experiences of human subjects.

Other constraints on perception are external to the subject in the sense that they are constraints on how the world must be outside of the subject's conscious point of view. For example, the subject's perceptual experience must be appropriately caused. If a subject's perceptual experience is caused by an hallucination, then this won't count as an instance of perception. I show that the external constraints on perception can be met in putative cases of moral perception, and in particular that we can be in the appropriate causal relation with moral facts regardless of whether they turn out to be secondary natural properties, non-secondary natural properties, or non-natural properties. In the most challenging case in which moral properties are non-natural properties, I argue that since moral facts supervene on the physical facts that cause perceptual experiences, these facts are appropriately related to the internal mental states that are constitutive of a moral perceptual experience.

The second part of the dissertation is spent showing that moral perception has epistemic import. I show that moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on a number of contemporary accounts of the epistemology of perception, including indirect realist, direct realist, evidentialist, and proper functionalist accounts of perceptual knowledge. Finally, one might think that even if moral perception were possible, the argument from moral disagreement is sufficient to undermine any potential moral knowledge that our perceptual faculties might provide. I show that the objection from moral disagreement is less acute given the possibility of moral perception because some human subjects are capable of perceiving moral facts while others are not, and thus the fact that there is disagreement among them is not surprising.

## Chapter 1: Defending Moral Perception

Father Copleston: *What's your justification for distinguishing between good and bad...?*

Bertrand Russell: *I don't have any justification any more than I have when I distinguish between blue and yellow. What is my justification for distinguishing between blue and yellow? I can see they are different.*

~ 1948 BBC Debate on the Existence of God

### 1.0 Introduction

This work is an instance of topical epistemology as opposed to general epistemology. A general epistemology is an inquiry into the following sorts of questions:

What is the nature of knowledge (or justification)?

What is the scope of our knowledge (or justification)?

What are the sources of our knowledge (or justification)?

What is the value of knowledge (or justification)?

A topical epistemology is an epistemology that seeks to answer these same questions with regard to a particular domain of inquiry. For example, modal epistemology investigates the epistemic status of modal beliefs, religious epistemology investigates the epistemic status of religious beliefs, etc.

This is a work of moral epistemology, and I argue for a particular answer to one of the domain-specific questions of moral epistemology. I defend the possibility of moral perception in an effort to show that we can have moral

knowledge by way of everyday, sensory perception (hereafter 'perception'). In fact, I think that at least some of our actual moral knowledge is perceptual knowledge. Here's the plan for the first chapter. In [§1.1](#) I defend the focus on moral epistemology as a topical epistemology worth investigating. In [§1.2](#) I present and clarify the central thesis of this dissertation—the claim that we can have moral knowledge by perception. In [§1.3](#) I motivate my view of moral perception by showing that it best explains the phenomenology of perceptual experience and belief, that it provides a non-skeptical solution to the problem of moral knowledge, that it has strengths over rival accounts of moral knowledge, and that it contributes to a defense of reflective equilibrium as a source of moral knowledge. I close with a sketch of my overall argument in [§1.4](#).

### **1.1 Motivations for Moral Epistemology**

First, it is important to motivate the focus on a topical epistemology.<sup>1</sup> Why focus on moral epistemology? What is so special about our beliefs about moral facts that warrants a detailed investigation that, say, our beliefs about clouds do not? The answer is twofold. First, holding true moral beliefs is often more important than holding true beliefs about clouds. Second, there are serious challenges to the epistemic status of moral beliefs that do not apply to other sorts of beliefs like our beliefs about clouds. I take the first point to be given: our moral beliefs shape how we live, how we treat others, etc. in a way that our beliefs about clouds do not. Of all of the beliefs that we hold, arguably moral beliefs are among the most important to get right—it's important to us that our moral beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> See Stewart 2007 for an excellent discussion of topical epistemologies in general and moral epistemology in specific.

are true. The second point—that there are serious challenges to the epistemic status of moral beliefs—is substantiated by the following three points.

First, many outside of philosophy are worried about the epistemic status of moral beliefs (though they would never express their worries in these terms). Some of these people are downright skeptics about moral knowledge. Others are less skeptical but certainly not sanguine about the situation. Consider the average undergraduate: she has no concerns about historical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, scientific knowledge, etc. (at least, she has no concerns before reading Descartes!), but she has serious misgivings about moral knowledge. The question that arises immediately in any ethics class is this: How can we know that something is wrong (or good, etc.)?

Second, this local skepticism about moral beliefs is repeated at the professional level. Epistemologists who eschew global skepticism nonetheless embrace moral skepticism. Two quick examples: Gilbert Harman argues for a limited moral skepticism and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong—no global skeptic—recently published a monograph entitled *Moral Skepticisms* in which he defends the claim that no moral belief is ever philosophically justified, where being ‘philosophically justified’ amounts to having epistemic as opposed to prudential justification for holding a belief.<sup>2</sup> The fact that these philosophers are not global skeptics suggests that either there is something unique about moral beliefs that makes them suspect or else there is some special form of skeptical argument that is sound when applied to moral knowledge but unsound when applied to non-moral knowledge. Stewart (2007) writes that:

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<sup>2</sup> See Harman 1977; 1986 and Sinnott-Armstrong 1996; 2006.

...the appearance that a particular topic alone is subject to a special sort of skeptical argument suggests that the topic in question may deserve its own topical epistemology....To illustrate this point, if a single topic is susceptible to a special kind of skeptical argument, this is at least some evidence that beliefs about that topic are the product of a process of belief formation which is not involved in the production of beliefs about other topics. ( p. 40)

The fact that at least some contemporary philosophers question the epistemic status of moral beliefs in particular motivates a topical epistemology that focuses exclusively on moral beliefs.

Third is what I'll call the traditional problem of moral knowledge. The problem exemplifies a "source worry" about putative instances of moral knowledge. Intuitively, when something (e.g. an experience) naturally results in an instance of knowledge, then that thing is the source of that knowledge.<sup>3</sup> For example, I know that if A is taller than B and B is taller than C, then A is taller than C. The source of this knowledge is my cognitive grasp of the concept "taller than," and, as such, this is a paradigm case of *a priori* knowledge. On the other hand, I know that grass is green by way of perception; this is a paradigm case of *a posteriori* knowledge. The source worry about moral beliefs can now be expressed as follows: most of our clear cases of knowledge are either *a priori* or *a posteriori* and yet moral knowledge seems to be neither.

I know that it's morally wrong to torture babies for fun, but this instance of knowledge seems unlike paradigm cases of either *a priori* or *a posteriori*

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Kierland has expressed doubts about the clarity of the idea that knowledge has sources. I thought that the matter was fairly obvious until I tried parsing the notion several different ways only to find that none of them was able to capture what I think we normally mean when we say that something is a source of knowledge. However, I do think that there is something to the idea that any given instance of knowledge has a particular source, and I think that this idea has widespread currency in philosophy (e.g. the entire modern period of philosophy is often cast as a struggle between rationalists and empiricists over the sources of knowledge).



knowledge. In order to motivate this worry, I need not defend the claim that all cases of knowledge can be sorted by various “sources,” nor need I defend the claim that moral knowledge is neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. What I am defending is that—at first glance—moral knowledge seems unique in a way that other sorts of knowledge are not. In terms of the source worry, it’s just not clear where we get our moral knowledge from. This is enough to motivate a special skeptical worry about the epistemic status of moral beliefs.

What all this suggests, I think, is that spending time on moral epistemology is defensible because moral beliefs are important and because there are serious challenges to the epistemic status of moral beliefs that do not apply to the epistemic status of beliefs more generally. A satisfactory moral epistemology would be one that addressed at least some of the skeptical concerns noted above by trying to eliminate the apparent differences between the epistemic status of moral beliefs and that of other types of beliefs. This dissertation is a step in that direction.

## **1.2 My View**

In this section, I provide the specifics of my thesis and distinguish it from various similar positions. My thesis is that at least some humans have perceptual moral knowledge (where this knowledge is propositional in character as opposed to “knowledge how” or any other such concept). In order for perception to provide a subject with knowledge (or justification), the perception must have a certain character. The precise nature of this character is best understood in light of Dretske’s (1969) distinction between seeing and seeing as. I might see your car

in the parking lot but fail to see *that* your car is in the parking lot. In this case, I would have seen your car though I would not have seen it as your car. A similar distinction was drawn by Grice (1961) between what he termed 'seeing' and 'observing':

If someone has seen a speck on the horizon which is in fact a battleship, we should in some contexts be willing to say that he has seen a battleship; but we should not, I think, be willing to say that he has observed a battleship unless he has recognized what he has seen as a battleship. (p. 147)

In Grice's example, the subject in question did not perceive that there was a battleship on the water since he had not recognized what he saw as a battleship. In other words, he didn't see the speck as a battleship. A few more examples make the distinction plain. Upon seeing the university president for the first time, I perceive the university president but fail to perceive *that* he is the university president (or, alternatively, I fail to perceive *of* the man *that* he is the university president). My dog Berkley can perceive me grilling Hawaiian chicken, but he cannot perceive that I am grilling Hawaiian chicken.

What the subject lacks in these cases is what I shall call 'perception as' or perception *de dicto*.<sup>4</sup> We might say that all perception is perception *de re* in the

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<sup>4</sup> One might be tempted to resist conflating *perception as* with perception *de dicto*. For example, if I were to perceive of the man that he's angry, this is an instance of *de re* perception, and yet it seems a good case of *perception as* since I am seeing the man as being angry. Brian Kierland has also pointed out that the *de dicto* and *de re* readings will have different implicatures. For example, 'Justin perceives that the man is angry' implies that I perceive that the object of perception is a man and that the object of perception is angry whereas 'Justin perceives of the man that he is angry' only implies the latter.

I think that Kierland is right about this, but what is crucial is that perceptual knowledge requires an instance of perception that can be accurately described by a claim with at least one 'perceives that' clause (or any of the cognates of 'perceive'). So while it's true that the *de dicto* and *de re* readings noted above have different implicatures, they both can be accurately described with at least one 'perceives that' clause: in the first case I see that the man is angry

sense that all perception is perception *of* some object or state of affairs, but perceptual knowledge requires more. Perceptual knowledge requires perception *de dicto*.<sup>5</sup> For example, if I were to hear an oriole in my backyard but not hear it as an oriole, I would need some further information before I could know that *that's* an oriole. This is why the distinction between perceiving and perceiving as is important for my thesis. Everyone who is not a moral anti-realist agrees that we have moral perception in the limited sense that we see actions that are, in fact, morally wrong, we hear people who are, in fact, morally vicious, etc. In other words, it is not contentious that we have moral perception *de re*. What is contentious is the claim that it is possible to have moral perception *de dicto*. This is the claim that, for example, it is possible to see *that* the action was wrong, hear of the person *that* he is impatient, etc. It is this stronger thesis that I shall establish. From here on I will use 'moral perception' to mean 'moral perception *de dicto*'.

To support my thesis that at least some humans have perceptual moral knowledge, I show that it is possible for humans to have moral experiences. The term 'moral experience' is ambiguous. In one sense stretching back at least as far as Brentano in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'moral experience' refers to a subject's emotional or affective reactions to something. According to a moral epistemology that employs this sense of 'moral experience', the epistemic heavy

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and in the second I perceive that the object is angry. So for my purposes, both are instances of perceiving as or perception *de dicto*.

<sup>5</sup> The reason that perceptual knowledge requires perception *de dicto* (in the sense indicated above), is because perceptual knowledge is propositional, and perception *de re* is not propositional.

lifting is done by an emotional state.<sup>6</sup> On this view, a particular moral belief is justified for an individual by the emotional response that he has when confronted with a certain moral situation. John Greco (2000) explains the view as follows:

...affective reactions such as indignation, empathy, revulsion, and attraction ground appropriate moral judgments about the objects of such emotions. For example, a feeling of revulsion toward some action might ground a moral judgment that the action is wrong. (p. 242)

Call this the *affective* sense of 'moral experience'.

However, in another sense, 'moral experience' denotes a phenomenal experience that is a species of empirical perception. In this latter sense, a moral experience is a perceptual experience that represents a moral property. In much the same way that one could have a perceptual experience of the cup as hot, one can have a perceptual experience of the situation as bad. Call this the *perceptual* sense of 'moral experience'. According to a moral epistemology that employs the perceptual sense of 'moral experience', it is not the subject's emotional reaction that is epistemically important for moral knowledge but the fact that he is perceiving the moral property in question.<sup>7</sup>

My view employs the perceptual sense of 'moral experience'. I argue that at least some humans are capable of moral perception, and that this perception

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of defenders of the epistemic value of moral experiences in this sense, see Brentano 1969, DePaul 1988, Lemos 1989, and Tolhurst 1990

<sup>7</sup> Of course, even a defender of the perceptual sense of 'moral experience' may invoke phenomenology as an essential feature of a perceptual experience or as an essential feature perceptual knowledge (though there are accounts of both that do not rely on phenomenology at all). For example, one might insist that it is impossible to perceive that the ball is round unless roundness has a certain look or feel to it. The distinction that I am drawing at present, however, is simply meant to distinguish views in which *perception* does the epistemic work in the account of moral knowledge verses cases in which it is the *emotional reaction* to what one perceives that does the epistemic work in the account of moral knowledge. This issue is taken up more fully in §2.4.2.

is a source of moral knowledge. Unfortunately, 'moral perception' is also ambiguous, and only one of the senses is genuinely a form of 'moral experience' in the perceptual sense. Some philosophers use 'moral perception' to refer to a case in which a subject comes to have true moral beliefs about a particular situation that the subject is confronted with.<sup>8</sup> For example, when a subject notices that his child is in pain and he understands that the pain is a morally relevant feature of the situation (whereas, say, the color of his child's shirt is not so relevant), this is a case of moral perception. Call this the *virtue* sense of 'moral perception'. In this sense, 'moral perception' has to do with moral perspicacity or moral acuity because the subject perceives of some state of affairs that it has some non-moral quality, and he rightly takes this quality to be morally important. Thus, in the virtue sense of 'moral perception', moral perception occurs whenever a subject becomes aware (perceptually or otherwise) of morally relevant *non-moral* properties like pain, discomfort, embarrassment, etc. that he antecedently believes to be morally relevant.

A second sense of 'moral perception' is *epistemic* in nature (and a species of perceptual moral experience as explained above). In this sense, 'moral perception' is akin to empirical perception, and moral perception occurs when a subject becomes aware of a *moral* property via a perceptual process. Since this latter sense of 'moral perception' is a necessary condition for moral knowledge by perception, I shall call this the *epistemic* sense of 'moral perception'. In this sense, 'moral perception' is an avenue for moral knowledge because the subject

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<sup>8</sup> See Blum 1991, Nussbaum 1990; see Starkey 2006 for a more detailed taxonomy of moral perception.

perceives of some object that it has some moral quality. In a case of moral perception in the virtue sense, a subject does not learn any moral facts (or at least she doesn't learn any via perception alone). Recall that in 'moral perception' in the virtue sense, a subject comes to know that a certain non-moral fact obtains, and together with her background knowledge that this non-moral fact is morally relevant, she is provided with a moral reason for action. So in that case she doesn't learn any moral facts by perception.

However, in 'moral perception' in the epistemic sense, a subject does learn that a certain moral fact obtains. The distinction between the two senses is illustrated by the following example. Suppose that Jones is unable to distinguish men from women. You inform him that almost everyone wearing a dress is a woman. Upon seeing a person wearing a dress, Jones comes to believe that the person is a woman. This instance is akin to moral perception in the virtue sense: Jones comes to know that a person is wearing a dress via perception, and— together with his background beliefs—this provides him with a reason to believe that the person is a woman. Contrast this case with an analog of moral perception in the epistemic sense.<sup>9</sup> Suppose that Jones is able to tell men from women just by looking at them (as we all can do). Upon seeing a person, Jones comes to believe that the person is a woman. This instance is akin to moral

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Johnson has suggested that this distinction is muddled by the fact that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties and thus the exercise of moral perception in the virtue sense makes one aware of the non-moral properties that realize the moral properties. However, the difference between moral perception in the virtue sense and moral perception in the epistemic sense is obvious when parsed in terms of perception *de dicto*. In the virtue sense of moral perception, the subject perceives that  $\phi$ , where  $\phi$  ranges over all non-moral propositions. For example, the subject might perceive that the cat is in pain. In the epistemic sense of moral perception, the subject perceives that  $\psi$ , where  $\psi$  ranges over all moral propositions. For example, the subject might perceive that the trade was unjust.

perception in the epistemic sense: Jones comes to know that the person is a woman via perception without making a conscious inference from background beliefs.

My view employs 'moral perception' in the epistemic sense. I argue that humans can perceive that objects (or states of affairs) have moral properties. In a case of moral perception, we perceive that the object (or state of affairs) bears some moral property. To put the matter bluntly, I shall argue that we can literally see that a state of affairs is good or that an action is morally wrong (where this 'see' is not the metaphorical 'see' as in 'I see that Obama is ahead in the polls').

To my knowledge, this view is explicitly defended at only a few places in the contemporary literature. One of the most significant contemporary attempts to show that values are perceptible was made by John McDowell. McDowell (1998a, 1998b) advocates a view in which values (including aesthetic and moral values) are secondary qualities. And since secondary qualities are essentially perceptible, it follows that moral values are essentially perceptible. However, in order to get the epistemological result that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual knowledge, McDowell relies on what I argue are specious metaphysical presuppositions (more about this in §3.2.2). I avoid McDowell's controversial assumption that moral properties are secondary, and so my account is radically unlike his.

John Greco (2000) extends his more general account of epistemic justification to putative cases of moral perception. While Greco and I agree on the basic thesis that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual, Greco's

account is idiosyncratic in that it relies on the particular view of perceptual knowledge defended in the first portion of his book. This is a disadvantage. Greco's overall epistemology is a species of agent reliabilism, and hence his defense of moral perception follows suit. Anyone who is not already convinced of his general epistemology will not find his defense of perceptual moral knowledge plausible. And while he adverts to some interesting hypotheses in cognitive science to explain how moral perception might be possible, he avoids the tough questions about the representation of moral properties in perceptual experience, the causal nexus between moral properties and perceptual experiences, etc. Unlike Greco, my defense tackles some of these questions without presupposing the truth of any account of general epistemology.

Watkins and Jolley (2002) argue for the claim that "we require no otherworldly perceptual abilities to perceive moral properties." Granting the epistemic potency of perception, this thesis paves the way for arguing for moral knowledge by perception. So it looks like Watkins and Jolley are arguing for my thesis. However, Watkins and Jolley's account is much closer to an account of knowledge by moral experience in the affective sense (as detailed above) because in their account a subject's emotional reaction to a perceptual experience plays the key role in the possibility of moral perception. They argue that only the virtuous person is in a position to have moral perception, and "what distinguishes the virtuous person from the nonvirtuous is that he feels the right way at the right time and to the right extent" (p. 78). My own view is that we can get moral knowledge in the same way that we get knowledge of the external



world: by perception. Since perception of the external world doesn't require that I feel the right way at the right time to the right extent, my account is importantly different than the account defended by Watkins and Jolley.<sup>10</sup>

Terence Cuneo (2003) extends the account of perceptual knowledge outlined by Thomas Reid to include moral perception. While my own view is not uniquely Reidian, Cuneo's account is perhaps the closest to my own. For example, I employ similar moves with regard to what Cuneo calls "acquired perception" to show that a perceptual experience can represent moral properties. However, I defend moral perception without relying on the uniquely Reidian framework presupposed by Cuneo, and I provide a reasonable story for how an account of moral perception can avoid the causal objection (more in chapter 3).

Sarah McGrath (2004) argues for the following thesis: "if we have moral knowledge, we have some of it in the same way we have knowledge of our immediate environment: by perception" (p. 209). McGrath's argument for this conclusion is a disjunctive syllogism: moral knowledge is either (A) the result of an inference to the best explanation or (B) the result of an inference from the non-moral properties on which the moral properties supervene or (C) the result of *a priori* reflection. But the combination of these three cannot account for all of our moral knowledge. So, there must be at least one other source of moral knowledge. McGrath then offers an inference to the best explanation for the

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<sup>10</sup> Again, an account of perception might require that we have certain phenomenological experiences in order to count as subjects of perception, and on these accounts there is some sense in which we must feel the right way at the right time to the right extent to count as subjects of perception. The difference, in a nutshell, is *where* the required phenomenology lies. In an affective sense of 'moral experience', it is one's emotional reaction to a perceptual experience that counts. In a perceptual sense of 'moral experience' it's the perception alone and not how one reacts to it emotionally that matters.

conclusion that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. While McGrath and I agree that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual, unlike McGrath I offer a positive account of moral perception. The thrust of McGrath's work is negative (i.e. she attempts to show how other accounts of moral knowledge fail), and she only offers the suggestion that some moral knowledge is perceptual as a suggestion. To the contrary, I shall attempt to sketch a positive account of moral perception while spending little time addressing the defects of alternative accounts of moral knowledge.

Finally, an epistemic connection between experience and moral belief is also suggested (though not explicitly defended) in the work of David McNaughton (1988) and Cornell Realists such as David Brink (1989) and Nicholas Sturgeon (2006). However, none of these authors offers a positive account of moral perception. This dissertation seeks to remedy that omission.

### **1.3 Motivations for My View**

The most powerful initial motivation for my view is the fact that it is faithful to the phenomenology of moral experience. In many cases, our actual reason for thinking that an action is wrong or that a situation is bad is simply the fact that we had a certain type of experience. The action seemed wrong to us. Gilbert Harman (1977) captures the phenomenology in the following vignette:

You can observe someone do something, but can you ever perceive the rightness or wrongness of what he does? If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong. (p. 4, emphasis his)

Abstract moral principles are noticeably absent from cases like this, as are patterns of conscious inference. In fact, oftentimes we find ourselves convinced of some moral principle or other, and yet we amend or repudiate these principles after having certain experiences. For example, perhaps reading Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* absolutely convinced you that bullfighting is morally permissible. However, upon witnessing your first bullfight, you come to believe that the practice is morally wrong. A straightforward explanation of your belief revision appeals to your perceptual experiences. On my view, regardless of what your antecedent moral beliefs implied, you could see that what the bullfighters were doing was morally wrong.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that my view gets the phenomenology right is a *prima facie* reason to think that it is true. If it is true that we have some moral knowledge by way of perception, then we would expect at least some moral beliefs to be the result of perceptual input in the same way that some external world beliefs are the result of perceptual input. And our everyday experiences bear this out: we regularly make moral judgments as immediate responses to perceptual input. My view accommodates this feature of the world.

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<sup>11</sup> An objector might argue that this kind of case might also be interpreted as a case of mediate justification where the justification of the moral belief is trivial. Perhaps before attending the bullfight you held an antecedent moral belief that it is wrong to cause pain of level X in sentient animals and your perceptual experiences justified the belief 'the bullfighters are causing pain of level X in the bull'. Under this reading, we have a case of mediate justification as your perceptual experiences directly justify a non-moral belief that is then "combined" with a moral belief to yield another moral belief. My response is to simply note that this reading strains the phenomenology of the case. When confronted with something horrible we oftentimes form moral beliefs without recourse to abstract moral principles, and this is analogous to other cases of perceptual beliefs. The perceptual experiences of a friend's scowling face gives rise to the perceptual belief that my friend is angry, and I do this without recourse to bridge principles that connect face shapes with emotions. The moral case—or so I argue—is very similar.

An objector might disagree that the phenomenology of moral beliefs lends initial support to the view that we can perceive moral properties. For example, one might note that when the truth of a moral judgment is contested, we are not likely to resort to ostentation. For example, imagine that I see a woman help an injured child, and I form the belief “*That* was a good thing to do.” If you were to ask me why this claim is true, I would say that her action eased the child’s pain, kept a promise to help the child, etc. I would *not* simply point to the situation. However, when confronted about a perceptual judgment of the external world, ostentation is the preferred response. “What do you mean the bananas aren’t ripe? Look at them!”

My response to this objection proceeds by way of analogy to aesthetic properties. Imagine that upon looking at a painting you come to believe that *this* painting is beautiful. When someone asks *why* you think that the painting is beautiful, you don’t merely point to the painting. Instead, as the objector points out, you cite features of the painting. The problem, as I see it, is that the question ‘why do you think that the painting is beautiful?’ is ambiguous. In one sense it is a question about the justification of a mental state: why is it that you *believe* as you do? In another sense it is a question about the object in question: why is it that the painting *is* beautiful?

This ambiguity carries over to the challenge to moral beliefs as well. When someone asks ‘why do you think that the action is wrong?’ the fact that we are quick to point out features of the action instead of merely referring to the experience shows that we are trying to answer the second of the two questions.

So the present objection to my reading of the phenomenology of moral experiences does not suffice to show that perception only provides non-moral information for a suppressed inference to a moral conclusion.

There are also other reasons to take the view seriously. First, it provides a solid response to the moral skeptic. Many philosophers are convinced that external world skepticism is false. So, too, many philosophers are convinced that moral skepticism is false. Just as an account of external world perception can repudiate external world skepticism, so too can an account of moral perception repudiate moral skepticism. Some arguments for moral skepticism are parasitic on arguments for knowledge skepticism more generally (e.g. brain-in-a-vat scenarios, closure principle arguments, etc.).<sup>12</sup> However, as noted in §1.1, there are a significant number of arguments for moral skepticism that are not isomorphic to these more general arguments for skepticism. Consider a more careful presentation of the source worry:

1. We know at least some moral claims.
2. The only sources of knowledge are reason or experience.
3. Neither reason nor experience is a source of moral knowledge.

Each of the propositions seems initially plausible, but they form an inconsistent triad. Call the problem of rectifying this inconsistency the traditional problem of moral knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of arguments for moral skepticism that are parasitic in this way, see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006.

<sup>13</sup> In "The Problem of the Criterion," Chisholm (1966, p. 59-60) compares the following three arguments for and against the possibility of moral knowledge. Each represents a unique solution to the problem.

There are three standard resolutions to the problem of moral knowledge. The moral skeptic rejects (1) and argues that we do not have any moral knowledge whatsoever.<sup>14</sup> The defender of a unique moral faculty rejects (2) and argues that there is at least one source of knowledge other than reason and experience.<sup>15</sup> The moral reductivist rejects (3) and argues that either reason or experience or both are possible sources for moral knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

A motivation for taking my view seriously is that it allows us to reject (3) and hang on to moral knowledge while avoiding positing a special moral faculty. Many philosophers are loath to give up (1) because they are more sure of the claim that we know at least some moral claims than they are sure of the soundness of skeptical arguments. Similarly, the motivation to hang on to (2) is a matter of simplicity: we recognize the epistemic potency of both reason and experience outside of the moral domain, and so if we can account for moral knowledge without positing a special moral faculty that appears to generate

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Intuitionist version

P) We have knowledge of certain ethical facts.

Q) Experience and reason do not yield such knowledge.

R) So, there is an additional source of knowledge. [i.e. proposition 2 is false]

Skeptic's version

Not-R) There is no source of knowledge other than experience and reason.

Q) Experience and reason do not yield any knowledge of ethical facts.

Not-P) So, we do not have knowledge of any ethical facts. [i.e. proposition 1 is false]

Reductive/ Critical version

Not-R) There is no source of knowledge other than experience and reason.

P) We have knowledge of certain ethical facts.

Not-Q) So, experience and reason yield knowledge of ethical facts. [i.e. proposition 3 is false]

<sup>14</sup> For example, Sinnott-Armstrong 1996 and 2006.

<sup>15</sup> For example, moral sensiblists may fall into this camp. See Hudson 1967, chapter IV.

<sup>16</sup> The name 'moral reductivist' comes from Chisholm's statement of the problem in Chisholm 1966. The moral reductivist reduces moral knowledge to either knowledge gained from reason or knowledge gained from experience.

knowledge without appeal to reason or experience, then we ought to do so. My account provides a resolution of exactly this sort.

While there are other accounts of moral epistemology that reject (3) and retain both (1) and (2), many of these accounts have been criticized in the contemporary literature. This paves the way for a second motivation for my account: it solves the traditional problem of moral knowledge in a way that is immune from the recent criticisms of other solutions. Again, this is not yet a reason to think that my view is correct. But it is a reason to take the view seriously. It's plausible that the majority of philosophers in contemporary philosophy who are not moral anti-realists are moral reductivists in the sense that they reject (3). However, the most common way of being a moral reductivist is to argue that reason is a source of moral knowledge. The problem is that serious objections have been raised to this possibility. For each account of how reason alone could provide moral knowledge, there is a litany of objections. Here is a sampling of proposals that do not rely on experience and are thus plausibly the result of reason alone (however "reason alone" is cashed out):

Proposal: We have innate moral knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Objection: Innate knowledge is impossible.<sup>18</sup>

Proposal: We have moral knowledge whenever we believe a true moral claim that seems true and is not undermined by other things we believe.<sup>19</sup>

Objection: Epistemic conservatism is false.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leibniz may have held this view. See Goad 1992.

<sup>18</sup> The classic defense of this claim is found in Locke. Carruthers 1992 covers many of the arguments against the possibility of innate knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Huemer 2005 defends *a priori* ethical intuitionism in just this way. The epistemic work of his entire account rests on the principle of phenomenal conservatism: if it seems to S as if *P*, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing that *P*.

<sup>20</sup> See Foley 1983 and Markie 2005.

Proposal: We have moral knowledge by way of an inference to the best explanation from non-moral facts to moral facts.

Objection: The supervenience relation between moral facts and non-moral facts is too complicated for humans to grasp.<sup>21</sup>

Proposal: We have moral knowledge because at least some moral truths are self-evident.<sup>22</sup>

Objections: (1) Substantive moral claims are synthetic and synthetic truths are not self-evident. (2) It is difficult to account for the wide-ranging disagreement among epistemic peers if moral claims are self-evident.<sup>23</sup>

I do not claim that any of these objections is decisive. My (limited) point is just that each of the major attempts to reject (3) in the traditional problem of moral knowledge faces significant objections. My view provides a way of being a moral reductivist that avoids all of these criticisms.

A third and final motivation behind my view is the fact that it justifies the use of reflective equilibrium in moral philosophy. In reflective equilibrium, one tries to balance abstract theoretical concerns with particular judgments. For example, we take a range of moral beliefs about particular cases (e.g. it is wrong for Bill to kill Mary, it is wrong for Steve to kill Andy, etc.) and try to unite the various cases under theoretic moral principles (e.g. it is wrong to kill). The result is a set of moral beliefs that are putatively justified because of coherence relations among both theoretical and concrete beliefs. This kind of balancing act is widely accepted as standard practice in the sciences. But if the method is to be adopted in moral theorizing, moral epistemologists face the following challenge, as posed here by Richard Boyd (1988):

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<sup>21</sup> See McGrath 2004 for an objection of this sort.

<sup>22</sup> See W.D. Ross 1930, Shafer-Landau 2005, and Peacocke 2006.

<sup>23</sup> For an example of the first sort of criticism, see Vayrynen 2008. For an example of the latter, see Mackie 1977.



There must be an answer to the question “What plays, in moral reasoning, the role played by observation in science?” which can form the basis for a realist rather than a constructivist conception of the foundations of reflective equilibrium in moral reasoning. (p. 201)

In science, at least some of our beliefs about the external world are justified prior to engaging in the reflective process. But without an account of how we could have moral knowledge (or at least justification) *prior to* engaging in reflective equilibrium, there are serious concerns as to whether or not reflective equilibrium alone is able to generate moral knowledge. This is because prior to engaging in reflective equilibrium, there is no reason to privilege some moral judgments over others for the balancing act between theory and data. Richard Brandt (1979) makes this point in his critique of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium:

...[Rawls'] theory claims that a more coherent system of beliefs is better justified than a less coherent one, but there is no reason to think this claim is true unless some of the beliefs are initially credible—and not merely initially believed—for some reason other than their coherence, say, because they state facts of observation....The fact that a person has firm normative conviction gives that belief a status no better than fiction. (p. 20)

As Brandt hints in this passage, an account of moral perception would explain why the data used in moral reflective equilibrium is useful: perceptual experience can provide good reason for thinking that certain particular moral claims are true.

#### **1.4 Assumptions and the Argument**

In this section, I note the assumptions that I rely on and state the argument for my thesis in a bare-bones form. First, I assume that we have moral beliefs. The reason is obvious: Moral knowledge requires beliefs with moral content. Let ‘non-cognitivism’ refer to the view that we do not have any moral beliefs. If non-cognitivism is true, then *a fortiori* we have no moral knowledge. This is because

knowing that *P* implies believing that *P*. Since a defense of the existence of moral beliefs (as opposed to a relevant non-cognitive mental attitude) would take me too far afield, I shall simply assume that we have at least some moral beliefs (i.e. non-cognitivism is false).<sup>24</sup>

I also assume that perception is a source of knowledge, though I assume no particular account of perceptual knowledge. I do not claim that in every instance in which a subject perceives that *X* is *F*, he knows that *X* is *F*. Perhaps he fails to form the belief that *X* is *F*, perhaps he is Gettiered, perhaps his belief is defeated, etc. However, I think that in many cases when a subject perceives that *X* is *F* he comes to know that *X* is *F*. This means that I deny knowledge-skepticism about perception. And while I think that there are plausible, independent reasons to deny this form of skepticism, rehearsing them would take me too far afield for this dissertation. If the reader is not already convinced, for example, that perception of the external world can provide us with knowledge about the external world, nothing I write here will convince him that analogous perception can provide us with moral knowledge.

Assumptions concerning the metaphysical status of moral properties are trickier. If we perceive that something has a moral property, it follows that moral properties exist (because 'perceive' is a success term). Since my thesis is that we have perceptual moral knowledge and perceptual moral knowledge requires that we perceive moral properties, my thesis implies that there really are moral properties. If we let 'moral realism' refer to the view that there are real moral

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<sup>24</sup> If 'non-cognitivism' is understood as a thesis that does not imply that we have no moral beliefs, then this sort of non-cognitivism may well be compatible with my thesis. I only assume that non-cognitivism in the restricted sense noted above is false.

properties, then my view implies that moral realism is true. For the purposes of this dissertation, I make assume that moral realism is true, i.e. there are moral facts. However, I note two caveats. First, at least on many accounts of epistemic justification, it is the internal mental state of the subject that does the epistemic work in a case of perceptual justification. If this is correct, then—even if it is impossible to have perceptual moral knowledge—it is possible to have perceptual justification *even if there are no moral properties* (more about this in §4.1). If moral realism were false, I would have to give up the claim that we have perceptual moral knowledge, but it would remain a live possibility that we might have perceptually justified (though false) moral beliefs—a conclusion still worth establishing.

Second is a methodological point: Even if my view entails moral realism, this fact alone does not require me to establish the truth of moral realism in order to defend my view. Just as a defender of perceptual knowledge of the external world need not offer arguments to the effect that there is an external world, neither do I as a defender of moral perceptual knowledge need to offer arguments to the effect that moral properties exist (more about this in chapter 3).

The rough argument for my thesis is as follows. In many cases, perceiving that  $X$  is  $F$  and thereby coming to believe that  $X$  is  $F$  is sufficient for knowing that  $X$  is  $F$ . For example, in many cases, perceiving that the child is happy and thereby coming to believe that the child is happy is sufficient for knowing that the child is happy. So if I can show that humans can perceive that something or other bears a moral property and thereby come to believe that it

bears this moral property (again, without recourse to a suppressed inference), then I can show that humans can have perceptual moral knowledge. This leaves me with two premises to defend: (A) humans can have moral perception and (B) in at least some cases this perception is sufficient for moral knowledge.

Chapters two and three are dedicated to a defense of (A), and this argument comes in two stages. Certain conditions must be met in order for a subject *S* to perceive that *X* is *F*. Some of these conditions are “internal” to the subject’s mind (e.g. he must have a particular kind of experience) and others are “external” (e.g. the subject must be causally affected in the right way). I shall call these the internal and external constraints on perception, and I assume that a subject perceives that *X* is *F* iff both of the internal and external constraints on perceiving that *X* is *F* are met. In chapter two I show that putative cases of moral perception meet the internal constraints on perception. In chapter three, I show that putative cases of moral perception meet the external constraints on perception as well.

Together, chapters two and three show that moral perception is possible. However, one might think that while perception is generally sufficient for perceptual knowledge, there is something unique about moral perception that prevents it from being a source of moral knowledge. To complete my argument I must defend (B)—the claim that in at least some cases this perception is sufficient for moral knowledge. In chapter four I attend to the epistemology of perception, and I show that in at least some cases moral perception sufficient for moral knowledge on a variety of accounts of perceptual knowledge.

## Chapter 2: Moral Perceptual Experience

*We detect moral aspects [of a situation] in the same way we detect (nearly all) other aspects: by looking and seeing.*

~ Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning*<sup>25</sup>

### 2.0 Introduction

My thesis is that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. The success of this project turns on being able to show that moral perception is possible. As noted in the introduction, certain conditions must be met in order for a subject *S* to perceive that *X* is *F*, and these conditions can be divided into internal and external constraints on perception (where ‘internal’ means roughly “internal to the subject’s mind”). The goal of this chapter is to show that the internal constraints on perception are met in putative cases of moral perception. In [§2.1](#) I draw a distinction between perception and perceptual experience, and I claim that having a perceptual experience as if *X* is *F* is sufficient to meet the internal constraints on perceiving that *X* is *F*. In [§2.2](#) I offer an argument by analogy that provides a *prima facie* case for the possibility of moral perceptual experiences. I entertain various ways of undermining the analogy in [§2.3](#) and argue that none are successful. In [§2.4](#) I provide a positive argument for what is perhaps the most controversial requirement of moral perceptual experiences, namely the requirement that the experience represent a moral property.

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<sup>25</sup> Platts 1997, p. 247.

## 2.1 Perceptual Experience

A subject *S*'s meeting both the internal and external constraints on perceiving that *X* is *F* is sufficient for *S* to perceive that *X* is *F*. But what are the internal and external constraints? In order to draw this distinction, it is helpful to distinguish *perception* from *perceptual experience*. Like other success concepts such as remembrance or observation, perception is factive. If a subject remembers that *P*, it follows that *P* is true (otherwise he is mis-remembering). Likewise, if a subject perceives *X*, then it follows that *X* exists. If a subject perceives that *X* is *F*, then it follows that *X* is *F*. Perceptual experience, however, is a non-factive concept. A subject can have a perceptual experience of a pink elephant when no such creature exists. When a subject hallucinates, he is having a perceptual experience, but he is not perceiving anything.

Something like this distinction is fairly standard in the literature, and most philosophers go further to grant that perceptual experience is a necessary condition for perception.<sup>26</sup> In other words, if a subject perceives that *X* is *F*, then he has a perceptual experience as if *X* is *F*. The converse, however, is not true. In order to demonstrate that this bifurcated analysis of perception is fairly standard in the literature, consider the following accounts of perception:

Thomas Reid (1846):

Perception requires:

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<sup>26</sup> The exception is the disjunctivist camp. Philosophers such as McDowell (1994) who defend a disjunctive conception of perception think that there is no internal state that both perception and hallucination have in common because they think that perception cannot be analyzed into an internal mental state plus some external condition. The position is called disjunctivism because it holds that the only mental state in common to both perception and hallucination is the following disjunctive state: the state of either perceiving or hallucinating. For an argument against disjunctivism, see Huemer 2001 pp. 58-60.

1. "Some conception or notion of the object perceived;"
2. "A strong and irresistible conviction of [the object's] present existence;"
3. "That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning;"<sup>27</sup>
4. an external object of perception that really exists;
5. a causal process starting with the object of perception and culminating with our conception of the object and our belief in it.<sup>28</sup>

Roderick Chisholm (1957):

"There is something that S *perceives* to be *f*" means: there is an *x* which is *f* and which appears in some way to S; S takes *x* to be *f*; and S has adequate evidence for the proposition that *X is F*. (p. 3)

Frank Jackson (1977):

"to (visually) perceive a material object is to be in a certain kind of perceptual state as a causal result of the action of that object" (p. 1).

John Greco (2000):

S perceives X as F if and only if (a) X is F, (b) X appears phenomenally to S as X normally would if X were F, and (c) S takes this phenomenal appearing as an appearing of X as F (p. 237).

Michael Huemer (2001):

S perceives X only when:

- i. S has a purely internal mental state called a "perceptual experience."

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<sup>27</sup> *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay II, Chapter V, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph.

<sup>28</sup> see *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay I, Chapter I; Essay II, Chapter XX; and Essay IV, Chapter 1. See also van Cleve 2004. Note that Reid's view does not require that a perception include any sensation or phenomenology.

- ii. There is some  $X$ —call it the object of perception—that at least roughly satisfies the content of the perceptual experience in (i).
- iii.  $X$  causes the perceptual experience in (i). (p. 57)

While these analyses of perception differ in their details, each requires a certain kind of mental state on the behalf of the perceiver. Reid writes of *an immediate conception* of the object perceived, Chisholm writes of a subject *taking* something to be a certain way, Jackson writes of “a certain kind of *perceptual state*,” Greco writes of a *phenomenal appearing*, and Huemer asserts that perception requires “a purely internal mental state called a *perceptual experience*.” Since the internal constraints on perception are roughly the conditions that are “internal” to the subject’s mind, I shall stipulate that the internal constraint on perception is that the subject have an appropriate perceptual experience. In other words, a subject  $S$  has a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  if and only if  $S$  meets the internal constraint on perceiving that  $X$  is  $F$ .

## **2.2 Moral Perceptual Experience**

Stipulating the meaning of terms merely dodges the substantive philosophical issue concerning the conditions for having a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$ . It would be helpful to have an account of these conditions since I shall argue that it is possible to have a perceptual experience as if something bears some moral property or other. Call such a perceptual experience a *moral* perceptual experience.

However, there is no widely-accepted view on the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a mental state counts as a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$ . Nonetheless, we each have an intuitive grasp of what it is to have a



perceptual experience as if, say, the fruit on the table is a kiwi. We can each imagine what it is like for us when we perceive that something is the case. I think that this intuitive grasp of a perceptual experience will be sufficient to motivate the point that I want to make in this chapter, and so in this section I shall note a number of paradigm cases of a subject having a perceptual experience as if something has some property or other, and I shall argue that putative cases of moral perception are relevantly similar. This argument by analogy concludes that moral perceptual experiences are possible, i.e. putative cases of moral perception meet the internal constraints on perception. In the next section I shall entertain objections that purport to show that the two kinds of cases are relevantly dissimilar.

Consider the following scenario. You walk into a restaurant, and you see someone carrying dishes of food to a table. Imagine what this feels like. You have certain sensations. Your field of vision includes certain colors and shapes. You hear certain sounds. You feel vibrations from your footsteps and from the dishes striking the table. You smell certain odors. What is important at this point is not how the experience is induced but rather what the experience itself feels like “from the inside.” After all, one could have this same experience (or a qualitatively identical one) in the Matrix. The Matrix looks much like our world, but unbeknownst to its inhabitants, all of them are really brains-in-vats connected to a supercomputer that stimulates them in ways parallel to the way normal humans are stimulated in the real world. People in the Matrix have perceptual experiences, though they do not perceive anything.

We have all had perceptual experiences that are similar to the one that I am trying to describe in the restaurant case, and we can say a few things about what they are like. Granting that the external constraints on perception were met (i.e. if the mental state were caused by the objects of perception in the right sort of way), you could see that the person clearing dishes is a waiter. You might also see that he is frustrated or angry. You might also smell that the patrons at the table have coffee. Perhaps you see that the waiter is trying to bring the dishes quickly. These are all paradigm cases of perceptual experiences.

I think that putative moral perceptual experiences are relevantly similar to these paradigm cases. Consider again Harman's (1977) paradigm case of moral perception:

If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong. (p. 4 emphasis his)

This case is a putative case of moral perception and not just a case of a moral perceptual experience. But ignoring the external elements of the story (since the subject could have had the same experience while in the Matrix), we can ask whether or not this case is relevantly similar to the paradigm cases considered above. And the answer seems to be yes.

Here is one way that they are similar: both kinds of experiences produce immediate belief. Upon having the experience I described, you simply come to believe that the waiter is frustrated just as the subject in Harman's case comes to believe that what the boys did was wrong. In each case, the experience culminates in belief without recourse to conscious inference. This fact alone is

sufficient for some philosophers to count both cases as perceptual experiences. For example, the internal constraints of Reid's (1846) account of perception require only (i) some conception or notion of the object, (ii) a strong conviction of the present existence of the object, and (iii) a requirement that the belief in the object's present existence and quality be immediate and not the result of conscious inference.<sup>29</sup> It is plausible that these conditions are met in the Harman case. The subject rounds a corner and as a result of his perceptual input he comes to believe—without recourse to conscious inference—that boys are present and doing something wrong.<sup>30</sup>

The sets of cases are alike in other ways. For example, both essentially include qualia. In other words, each mental state has a unique phenomenology. In Harman's example, it is not as if the subject merely *thinks* about a cat being burned or *considers* the proposition 'a cat is set on fire' before his mind. Philosophers such as Chisholm give phenomenology a key role in adjudicating whether or not a subject has a perceptual experience as if *X* is *F*. According to Chisholm (1957), *S* perceives that *X* is *F* just when:

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<sup>29</sup> Reid's account makes no essential reference to phenomenology, and he is forthright about this implication of his account:

There may be other beings who can perceive external objects without rays of light or vibrations of air, or effluvia of bodies---without impressions on bodily organs, or even without sensations . . .

We might, perhaps, have had the perception of external objects without either impressions upon the organs of sense, or sensations. (*Inquiry* 6, §21)

<sup>30</sup> Of course, as Peter Markie has pointed out to me, some non-perceptual experiences have this same effect. Upon considering whether or not 113 is prime, I immediately find myself believing it. This is a reason to think that Reid's analysis of a perceptual experience is too lenient: it counts some non-perceptual mental states as perceptual.

...there is an  $x$  which is  $f$  and which appears in some way to  $S$ ;  $S$  takes  $x$  to be  $f$ , and  $S$  has adequate evidence for the proposition that  $x$  is  $f$  (p. 3)

Chisholm claims that for  $X$  to appear  $F$  to  $S$  is (among other things) for the subject to sense  $F$ -ly. In restaurant example, this means that you experience the person “waiterly” and “tryingly.” While admittedly awkward as a locution, it seems plausible that if we can experience waiterly and tryingly we can also experience wrongly, and in the Harman case we might describe the phenomenology by saying that the subject experiences the act wrongly. Now of course it might turn out that while both experiences include qualia, in the restaurant case there is a qualia that is associated with the content *trying* whereas in the Harman case there is no qualia that is associated with the content *wrong*. In other words, one might think that it’s not enough to simply note that both experiences include qualia; the burden is to show that each has qualia that are essentially connected to the content of the representation, and this seems unlikely in the Harman case.<sup>31</sup> This would, indeed, be a relevant difference between the two cases, and I shall entertain ways of pressing this objection in §2.3. For now I simply note that the two cases are on a par at least with respect to the fact that they are both mental states with qualia.

The similarity between the cases goes even further. We can say that the experience is *given* in both cases. This is just to say that the experience is spontaneous from the point of view of the subject in a way that makes it seem as if something external is presenting itself to the subject. In Harman’s case, it seems to the subject as if he merely rounds the corner and is presented with a

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<sup>31</sup> Matt McGrath has pressed this objection.

certain state of affairs. It is not as if the subject is calling up the experience on his own as he would in a case of imagining, etc. In a paper critical of moral perception, Tom Sorrell (1985) concedes this much:

...part of what it is like to see that the cat's being set on fire is wrong, is for the wrongness of the action to be borne in on one. Seeing that the thing is wrong is in some respect involuntary, and the content of the observation seems to be supplied wholly by an event external to the observer. (p. 180)

This fact is important, as philosophers like William Alston (1991) argue that this element of givenness is not just necessary but *sufficient* for a mental state to count as a perceptual experience. He writes that:

...what I take to be definitive of perceptual consciousness is that something (or so it seems to the subject) *presents* itself to the subject's awareness as so-and-so...I shall take it, then, that it is both necessary and sufficient for a state of consciousness to be a state of perceptual consciousness that it (seem to the subject to) involve something's presenting itself to the subject, S, as so-and-so, as purple, zigzagged, acrid, loud, or whatever. (pp. 36, 38)

So on Alston's view, what is crucial in a perceptual experience that *X* is *F* is that it seem to the subject as if there were some object *X* presenting itself to the subject as being *F*.<sup>32</sup> This condition is certainly met in the restaurant case, and

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<sup>32</sup> The addendum "presenting itself to the subject" is important to rule out certain cases of mental states that are clearly non-perceptual. The rough idea is that in a case of perceptual experience as if *X* is *F*, it must seem to the subject as if the object itself is the source of the perceptual information. For example, consider the following case described by James van Cleve (2004):

I return home and see my wife's car keys on the counter (or hear my son say "Mom's home"), whereupon I automatically conceive of her and believe that she is home. Since she is upstairs, I do not perceive her, but it seems that I fulfill all the conditions for Reidian perception. (p. 127)

Van Cleve doesn't have a perceptual experience as if his wife is home because—while it may seem to him that his wife is home—it does not seem to him that his wife is presenting herself to him as being home. Instead, it is the keys that are presenting themselves to him, and it is this perceptual experience that makes it seem as if his wife is home.

it's also met in Harman's case.<sup>33</sup> In the restaurant case it seems to you that there is some object in your vicinity that is presenting itself as a waiter. In the Harman case it seems to the subject that there is some action in his vicinity that is presenting itself as wrong. If Alston is correct about the necessary and sufficient conditions for perceptual experience, this alone would show that moral perceptual experience is possible.

I conclude that the similarities between the descriptions of the paradigm cases of perceptual experience and the description of the putative case of moral experience provide at the least a *prima facie* case for the claim that moral perceptual experiences are possible. Granting that there are no defeating objections to this analogy, I conclude that moral perceptual experiences are possible. In the next section I consider possible objections to this argument from analogy.

### **2.3.0 Objections to the Possibility of Moral Perceptual Experience**

In the previous section I compared a putative case of moral perceptual experience with other paradigm cases of perceptual experience, and I noted that they are similar in a number of important respects. As noted above, on some accounts of perceptual experience these similarities are sufficient to show that the putative case counts as a genuine instance of perceptual experience. In this section I entertain various responses to the crucial analogy.

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<sup>33</sup> This is because in the Harman case it certainly seems to the subject as if he's being presented with an action that is morally wrong. One might read Alston as giving a stronger condition for perception: there must be a unique qualia associated with the object's being an *X* and the object's being *F* in order for a subject to perceive that *X* is *F*. If this stronger reading is correct, then it's not obvious yet whether or not the Harman case meets the condition or not; it will depend on whether or not there is any phenomenology associated with the action's being wrong, something that I tackle later in the chapter.

### 2.3.1 No High Order Representation

One objection to the argument might accept that the paradigm cases are relevantly similar to putative cases of moral perceptual experience but deny that the paradigm cases are instances of perceptual experiences of the facts described. The only plausible way of defending this objection is to insist that it is in principle impossible to represent high order properties (e.g. being frustrated) in a perceptual experience. Then, since the paradigm cases all involve the instantiation of high order properties, none of the paradigm cases is a perceptual experience. On this view it is not possible to have a perceptual experience as if the waiter is angry. And so even if Harman's putative case of perceptual experience is similar to these paradigm cases, this analogy gives us no reason to think that the Harman case is a case of moral perceptual experience.

Motivating this objection requires a defense of two claims: (A) a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  represents  $X$  as being  $F$ ; (B) it is impossible to represent high order properties like being angry, trying, morally wrong, etc. Regarding the first, if an experience represents something to be the case, it has a specific content. More carefully, an experience  $E$  represents that  $P$  if and only if  $E$  includes the content that  $P$ .<sup>34</sup> There are a number of contemporary views of perception that deny that perceptual experiences have any content so

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<sup>34</sup> The standard account of content maintains that the contents of an experience are the conditions under which the experience is accurate. This view says simply that content amounts to accuracy conditions. If a certain experience  $E$  is accurate just in case there is a bird in a green bush, then the content of  $E$  is 'there is a bird in a green bush'. I remain neutral on the question of how this content is characterized since settling this dispute is not necessary for my project.

described.<sup>35</sup> These philosophers usually understand perceptual experience as a “raw sensation” with no accuracy conditions. Perceptual experience, on these views, is non-intentional. Though controversial, I am willing to grant that perceptual experiences are representational. If it turns out that they are not, then I have no burden of proof to show that a perceptual experience can represent a moral property, and the current objection is irrelevant.

So what can be said on behalf of (B)? Granting that perceptual experiences are representational clears the way for a formalized objection to the possibility of moral perceptual experiences:

No High Order Representation Argument

- (1) It is not possible for a perceptual experience to represent a high order property.
- (2) All moral properties are high order properties.
- (3) So, it is not possible for a perceptual experience to represent a moral property.

While we lack a precise distinction between high and low level properties, we do have an intuitive grasp of the distinction, and this is enough to make it reasonable to think that (2) is true. Paradigm cases of low order properties are colors, shapes, spatial relations, etc. Paradigm cases of high order properties are agential properties like anger, frustration, doubt and dispositional properties like dangerous, trying, etc. Certainly moral properties are properties of the latter sort. But what is the defense of (1)?

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Thomas Reid had such a view. Contemporary defenders of the view that experiences have no accuracy conditions include Sellars 1975 and Travis 2004. For an exceptionally clear explanation of a variety of views that deny that experiences have accuracy conditions, see Siegel 2006.



(1) is defended by defending the view that only low order properties can be represented in experience. There is a camp of philosophers who defend variations on this theme.<sup>36</sup> Roughly, the thought is that the content of an experience is determined externally. In other words, the content of a mental state—in this case a perceptual experience—is determined by the relation between that mental state and the external environment. According to externalism about content, it is possible that two intrinsically identical individuals have mental states that differ in content because one is related to the external environment in a way crucially different from the other.<sup>37</sup>

As a matter of logic, externalism about perceptual content *need not* exclude the representation of high order properties. But contemporary defenders of externalism about perceptual content insist that representation is limited to features of the world that causally co-vary with phenomenal cues under normal perceptual conditions. And since only low order properties like color and shape co-vary with phenomenal cues and not high-level properties like being angry, it is only the former that can be represented in experience. Consider Tye's (1995) account:

Which features involved in bodily and environmental states are elements of phenomenal contents? There is no *a priori* answer. Empirical research is necessary. The relevant features will be the ones represented in the output representations of the sensory modules. I call these features, whatever they might be, *observational* features. They are the features our sensory states

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<sup>36</sup> See Clark 2000, Dretske 1995, and Tye 1995.

<sup>37</sup> Tye (1995) is explicit about this implication of his view on perceptual content: "The lesson of the problem of transparency is that *phenomenology ain't in the head*. Just as you cannot read semantics out of syntax, so you cannot read phenomenology out of physiology ..... Phenomenology is, in this way, externally based. So systems that are internally physically identical do not *have* to be phenomenally identical" (p. 151, emphasis Tye's).

track in optimal conditions....I conjecture that for perceptual experience, the observational features will include properties like being an edge, being a corner, being square, being red. (p. 141)<sup>38</sup>

An account like Tye's can be used to defend (1) because it purports to show that only low order properties can be represented in perceptual experience (though he leaves this open for more empirical research). If so, then it is not possible for human perceptual experiences to represent high order properties, and since moral properties are high order properties, moral perceptual experiences are impossible.

There are broadly three ways of responding to this objection, the first two of which undercut the justification for premise (1) in the No High Order Representation Argument. First, one can deny externalism about perceptual content. In fact, I think that externalism about perceptual content is false, but I haven't the space to argue for that thesis here. Instead, I will note other ways of responding to the argument that do not rely on denying externalism about perceptual content.

Second, one can grant externalism about content but question the limitation to low order properties. The objector needs an externalist account of content that allows only low order properties to stand in the right kind of relation to phenomenal cues. Tye's story about causal co-variation seems inadequate to the task. For example, he writes the following:

Suppose, for example, it looks to me that there is a tiger present. It seems plausible to suppose that the property of being a tiger is not itself a feature represented by the outputs of the sensory modules associated with vision. Our sensory states do not track *this* feature.

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<sup>38</sup> By 'phenomenal content', Tye means any representational content that is nonconceptual.

There might conceivably be creatures other than tigers that look to us phenomenally just like tigers. (p.141)

Why is the property of being a tiger not represented in the perceptual experience? Putatively it is because the property of being a tiger does not co-vary in the right sort of way with the phenomenal cues of normal human beings under normal observational conditions. But intuitively, this seems wrong. Having a tiger-like phenomenal experience is a pretty good indicator of the presence of a tiger. Tye responds by noting that it is logically possible that a human has the tiger-like phenomenology in response to other external inputs (e.g. being in perceptual contact with a panther that is cleverly disguised as a tiger). Well, this is true, but I submit that it's true of a virtually all of our phenomenal experiences. It is logically possible that a human has an experience with edge-like phenomenology in response to an external input that was not an edge. But this isn't enough to show that the two don't reliably co-vary. The point is simply that externalists about content have more work to do in order to show that high order properties are *in principle* unable to be represented in perceptual experience, and it is this claim that is the most plausible way to defend (1) in the No High Order Representation argument.<sup>39</sup>

Third, one can accept externalism about content and grant that the No High Order Representation Argument is sound, but insist that this poses no

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Kierland offers the following objection. Suppose an objector concedes that (1) is false by allowing that it is in principle possible for an experience to represent high order properties. Still, he might object that as a matter of contingent fact, humans do not (or cannot) have perceptual experiences that represent high order properties. This weaker major premise is enough to support the conclusion that no human has (or can have) a moral perceptual experience. I certainly agree that this move is possible, but I fail to see a plausible defense for the weaker premise. If it is possible for high order properties to be represented in a perceptual experience, then why think that no high order property is ever represented in some human's perceptual experience?

problem for the view that perception is a source of moral knowledge. This latter move denies an essential link between perceptual representation and perceptual knowledge by claiming that it is not necessary for an experience to represent  $P$  in order for that experience to provide a subject with perceptual knowledge that  $P$ .<sup>40</sup>

This response is best sketched as a dilemma:

- (4) Perceptual representation is limited to low order properties or it is not. (LEM)
- (5) If it is, then having a perceptual experience that represents that  $P$  is not a necessary condition for having the perceptual knowledge that  $P$ .
- (6) If it is not, then premise (1) of the No High Order Representation argument is false.
- (7) So, in either case the current objection to moral perceptual knowledge fails.

The defense of (5) is straightforward. If it turns out that perceptual experiences can only represent low order properties, then it is false that a subject needs to perceive that  $X$  is  $F$  in order to have perceptual knowledge that  $X$  is  $F$ . This is because we obviously have perceptual knowledge of the instantiation of high order properties. I have perceptual knowledge that the car is a Ford, that *that's* my house, and that my wife is angry. None of these are low order properties.<sup>41</sup> So, if externalists are right that the contents of my perceptual

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<sup>40</sup> If one opts for this move, a natural question is the following: If a perceptual experience doesn't represent that anything is the case, why is a perceptual experience a necessary condition for perceptual knowledge? There are a variety of responses to this sort of concern, but I'll just trace one here. Suppose that what matters for knowledge is reliable belief. Then, if perceptual beliefs are sufficiently reliable, they will count as knowledge regardless of whether the perceptual experiences necessary for perception have representational content.

<sup>41</sup> An objector may dig in his heels and insist that my belief that the car is a Ford is not a perceptual belief. Instead, she may insist, it is the result of a suppressed inference that combines my perceptual beliefs about the shape of the car with my background knowledge about what Fords look like. Three points are important to make here. First, it's not obvious to me that we're ever justified in claiming that a belief is the result of a suppressed inference. If by

experience are limited to low order properties, then perceptual knowledge is disconnected from what is represented in my experiences. I can perceptually know that *P* even though my perceptual experience doesn't represent that *P* is the case. Thus the soundness of the No High Order Representation argument is irrelevant for my overall thesis that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.

The defense of (6) is just as obvious. On this horn of the dilemma, the objector concedes that perceptual representation is not limited to low order properties. But if not, then there is no principled reason for thinking that a perceptual experience cannot represent the instantiation of some high order property, and this is the denial of premise (1). Thus the No High Order Representation argument is unsound. I conclude that this particular objection which attempts to dismiss the paradigm cases in my argument from analogy, fails, and the argument escapes unscathed.

### **2.3.2 No Moral Representation**

A different way of objecting to the argument by analogy in §2.2 is to insist that there is a relevant difference between the paradigm cases of perceptual experience as described in the restaurant scenario and the putative perceptual

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'supressed inference' we mean something like 'sub-conscious inference', then how could we ever come to know that a belief is the result of such an inference? For this reason, I am skeptical of claims that beliefs result from suppressed inferences. Second, even if it is true that the belief is the result of a suppressed inference, this is not enough to show that the belief is non-perceptual. Perhaps most (or all) of our perceptual beliefs involve such suppressed inferences. Third, even if I grant that the belief that the car is a Ford is the result of a suppressed inference and that furthermore no perceptual belief is the result of a suppressed inference, there is still something importantly different about my belief that the car is a Ford when compared to other beliefs that are obviously the result of inference. Even if not perceptual, per se, the belief has a strong epistemic footing that is importantly connected to perception in a way that many of our beliefs are not. What this means is that my thesis is still important: if I can show that at least some moral beliefs are relevantly similar to my belief that the car is a Ford, then even though I have not shown that some moral beliefs are perceptual, I have shown that some moral beliefs have a unique and strong epistemic footing that is importantly connected to perception.

experience as described in Harman's paradigm case of moral perception. In other words, while high order properties are *in principle* representable in perceptual experience, there is something special about moral properties that prohibits a perceptual experience from representing a moral property. The most salient putative difference is that there is no way that moral properties look. And if having a characteristic look is a requirement for perceptual representation, then this difference would indicate why moral properties cannot be represented in a perceptual experience. Thus Harman's case is relevantly dissimilar to the paradigm cases after all. There is a way a waiter looks when he's angry, but there is no way an action looks when it's wrong.

This sort of objection is common in the literature. W.D. Ross (1939) writes that rightness "is not an attribute that its subject is just directly perceived in experience to have, as I perceive a particular extended patch to be yellow, or a particular noise to be loud" (p. 168). Likewise, Judith Jarvis Thomson (2005) writes that:

There seems to be nothing discoverable by looking, as the presence of redness is discoverable by looking, or by listening, as the presence of sounds is discoverable by listening, or by any other form of perception, which wrongness could be thought to consist in.  
(p. 7)

Finally, Michael Huemer (2005) claims that "the problem is that in fact, moral properties are entirely unobservable. Moral value does not look like anything, sound like anything, feel (to the touch) like anything, smell like anything, or taste like anything" (p. 85).

I'll call this objection the Looks Objection. The argument can be parsed very simply:

The Looks Objection

- (8) It is possible for a perceptual experience to represent a property only if that property has a certain look.
- (9) Moral properties don't look any certain way.
- (10) So, it is not possible for a perceptual experience to represent a moral property.

According to the Looks Objection, perceptual experiences cannot represent moral properties unless there is a look associated with that property. Consider again Huemer (2005):

For someone to observe that an object is F, where F is some property, there must be *a way that F things look* (or sound, smell, etc.), and the object must look (sound, smell, etc.) that way....The point of interest here is that there is no such thing as *the way that wrongful actions look* or *the way that permissible actions look*. That is why you cannot literally see, with your eyes, that an action is wrong. (p. 86)

And since moral properties do not have a look, they cannot be represented in perceptual experiences.

I grant the truth of (8). It is plausible that a perceptual experience represents various properties via phenomenology or looks. However, it is not at all obvious that (9) is true. The most straightforward way to assess the truth of (9) is to apply the standard analysis of 'look' (i.e. X things look like something to S iff \_\_\_\_ ) to the case of moral properties. However, there is no standard analysis of 'look'. This is because the word 'look' is ambiguous, a point made forcefully by Chisholm (1957) who demonstrates that most appear words such as

'look' and 'see' are ambiguous. I shall argue that the Looks Objection commits a fallacy of equivocation. There is no reading of 'look' such that both (8) and (9) are true.

Since there is no standard analysis of 'look', I shall simply appropriate the accounts of others in the literature. Though perhaps not exhaustive, Jack Lyons (2005) provides the following helpful starting place with his taxonomy of the locution 'X looks *F* to a subject *S*':

**X doxastic looks *F* to *S*** iff *S* is disposed to believe that *X* is *F*.

**X epistemic looks *F* to *S*** iff *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing that *X* is *F*.

**X experiential-doxastic looks *F* to *S*** iff the way *X* looks to *S* disposes *S* to believe that *X* is *F*.

**X experiential-epistemic looks *F* to *S*** iff the way *X* looks to *S* *prima facie* justifies *S* in believing that *X* is *F*.

**X perceptual-output looks *F* to *S*** iff one of *S*'s perceptual systems is outputting an identification of *X* as *F*.

Which sense of 'look', if any, is relevant for the Looks Objection? When Huemer writes that "moral value does not look like anything," what sense of 'look' does he have in mind? We can rule out the first two immediately as each is metaphorical (i.e. non-phenomenological) senses of look. For example, I say "it looks like Obama will win in November" to report that I *believe* that Obama will win in November.<sup>42</sup> There is no mention of phenomenology. So this isn't the target of the Looks Objection. Furthermore, all that is required for something to perceptual-output look to me as if *X* is *F* is that my perceptual system "output" the

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<sup>42</sup> As a helpful rule of thumb, an appearance locution is metaphorical if it would be appropriate for someone lacking the relevant sense modality to assert the phrase in question. For example, a blind person could appropriately assert that it looks like Obama will win in November.



thought or belief that  $X$  is  $F$ . In other words, when I am confronted with certain perceptual input, I spontaneously form the thought ' $X$  is  $F$ ' (without any essential recourse to the phenomenology of the perceptual input). It is obviously possible for moral properties to look like something in this sense of the term.<sup>43</sup> Finally, since an experiential-epistemic look is just an epistemically-charged version of an experiential-doxastic look, then—granting that this sketch of looks locutions is exhaustive—the target of the Looks Objection must be the latter. Using Lyons' taxonomy, premise (9) of the Looks Objection should be replaced with:

(9') Moral properties do not experiential-doxastic look like anything.

In other words, there is no way that something can look that would dispose a subject to believe that it was dishonest, wrong, morally bad, etc.

Parsed this way the Looks Objection is unsound because (9') is false. It's easy to imagine a case in which a certain kind of perceptual experience would dispose a subject to form a moral belief. Consider again Harman's case in which a subject sees a group of hoodlums light a cat on fire and comes to believe that the action was wrong. In this case, it is obvious that having the perceptual experience disposes the subject to believe that the action is wrong, and it is plausible that this is because of *the way* that things appear to him. Here's an argument for this latter claim: had things not appeared *that way*, then the subject would not have believed that the action was wrong.<sup>44</sup> It's not as if the subject would have formed the belief regardless of how things had appeared to him when he rounded the corner (or, at least many subjects would not be so

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<sup>43</sup> See Harman 1977 p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> For a defense of this counterfactual, see Sturgeon 1988.

disposed). For example, had the subject rounded the corner and it appeared to him that the boys were playing baseball, he would not be disposed to form the belief that what they boys were doing was wrong. So, I conclude that the way things appear plays a crucial role in his being disposed to believe that the action is wrong.

Of course, perhaps Lyons' taxonomy is not exhaustive. Perhaps there is another sense of 'looks' not captured by Lyons' taxonomy. One of Chisholm's (1957) senses of 'looks' might be relevant here, namely the comparative sense of 'looks'. In the comparative sense, 'it appears to S that the object is red' implies that the object appears as red things normally appear. Perhaps premise (9) of the Looks Objection uses 'looks' in the comparative sense:

(9'') Moral properties do not comparative look like anything.

In other words, there is no way in which moral properties normally appear, and thus moral properties do not comparative-look like anything.

Is it true that there is no way that moral properties normally appear? On this reading, the Looks Objection claims that, for example, there is no way that morally bad things normally appear. But what is the scope of 'normal'? Jackson (1977) notes the following ambiguity:

There is a further respect in which the way an F normally looks is relative, namely, to persons: the way an F normally looks in a given set of circumstances to one person may be very different to the way it looks to another person in the same circumstances. (p. 32)

This distinction provides two readings of the objection. On the first reading of 'normal' in which it is relative to all subjects, (9'') is true: it is plausible that there is no one way that, say, badness, appears to all possible perceptual subjects.

But this doesn't pose a problem for perceptual moral knowledge because on this reading (8) is false. On the present reading of 'look' and 'normal', premise (8) implies that in order for any subject to have a perceptual experience as if the ball is red, all red things must appear the same to everyone. However, thought experiments about the possibility of color inverts show that it is plausible that any number of phenomenal cues might be associated by a subject with any given property. The phenomenal cues that represent X to you might represent Y to me. So the requirement in (8) is much too strong.

A more plausible reading of the scope of 'normal' would restrict the range to that of an individual observer. Both William Alston (1991) and John Greco (2000) insist on this more limited scope. For example, in explaining his account of perception, Greco writes:

...the account allows that there is a phenomenal aspect of perception, but it conceives of that in terms of normality. In other words, it is not assumed that there is any intrinsic feature of a phenomenal appearing that makes that appearing, say, the appearance of a tree. What makes a phenomenal appearance the appearance of a tree is just the fact that this is how a tree would normally appear phenomenally, *relative to the cognitive agent in question*. By means of this same feature, the account disallows that just any phenomenal appearing can ground a perception, just so long as the agent takes it a certain way. Rather, the appearing must be tied into the normal perceptual dispositions of the agent. (p. 238, emphasis mine)

This is a much lower standard. As long as, say, bad things really did have a certain phenomenal quality for some given person, then there would be a way that bad things normally look for that person.

However, the objection remains unsound even on this reading of 'normal'. On the one hand, there is something compelling about the Looks Objection.

After all, I can easily note that red things normally appear like *this*, but I cannot so easily note that wrong things normally appear like *that*. However, this goes for virtually all higher-level properties. For example, it is also plausible that there is no one way, say, *dangerous*, normally appears to me. The cliff looks dangerous in *this* way, the pistol looks dangerous in *that* way and the poisonous snake looks dangerous in one way while the pills on the counter look dangerous in another.<sup>45</sup> But this doesn't show that nothing appears dangerous to me. Other examples are easy to come by. Is there only one way that 'trying' appears to you? Plausibly not, but still we can see that the child is trying to tie his shoes and hear that the dog is trying to dig out from under the fence.

If the objector grants that perceptual experiences can represent danger without there being a way in which danger normally looks (on this restricted reading of 'normal'), then it is not a requirement on perceptual experiences that there be a way a property normally looks in order for that perceptual experience to represent the property in question. On this reading, (8) is again false. On the other hand, if the objector insists that there really is a way that dangerous things look, albeit a complicated one that we cannot articulate, then this response is also open to the defender of moral perceptual experiences. On this option, an argument for (9'') is not easy to find. The fact, if it is a fact, that no one can specify what a morally wrong act normally looks like is no evidence that there is no such look. So on one horn of the dilemma we have a reason to think that the

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<sup>45</sup> Suppose you find it plausible that there is some way that *dangerous* appears to you in each of these cases, or at least you find that there is a considerable overlap in the way that it appears to you in each of the cases. If this seems plausible, I suggest that it shall also seem plausible that there is a considerable overlap in the way certain wrong actions appear to you.

major premise of the Looks Objection is false, and on the other we have no reason for thinking that the minor premise is true.

On the analyses of 'look' considered here, the Looks Objection is unsound. Perhaps there is some analysis of 'look' on which both premises of the Looks Objection are true. If so, the burden of producing this analysis lies with the defender of objection. I am skeptical since I think that any account of 'look' that is strong enough to rule out moral looks will thereby rule out other high order properties that we intuitively think look like something (e.g. he looks lonely).

But perhaps we can proceed with an intuitive feel for the problem. What bothers some about the possibility of moral perception seems to be the following: acts that are morally wrong often look just like acts that are morally permissible, where by 'look' we means something like "have the very same phenomenology." When I see one person shoot another in an alley, the act could have been an act of senseless violence (and thus morally wrong) or an act of self defense (and thus morally permissible). In either case, it would have looked the same to me. Thus I can't use phenomenology alone to determine whether the act was permissible or wrong.

This much seems right. But what follows? Certainly not that I can't have a perceptual experience as if an act is wrong. This is because having a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  does not require an *essential* connection between phenomenology and property instantiation. Consider the first option: perhaps in order for a subject to have a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$ , the following conditional must be true: if  $X$  is  $F$ , then  $X$  looks like *this* (where 'this'

picks out a certain phenomenology). This conditional is false. For example, not all hot things look the same way (e.g. stars and stove tops look very different despite the fact that both are hot). Perhaps the essential connection between properties and phenomenology is the other way around: if  $X$  looks like *this* (where the 'this' picks out a certain phenomenology), then  $X$  is  $F$ . This conditional is also false. For example, Descartes' tower looked round to him despite the fact that it was not. This fact doesn't show that we cannot have perceptual experiences as if things are round.

At best the connection between phenomenology and instantiated facts is contingent. How about the following: in order to have a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$ , things that look like *this* (where the 'this' picks out a certain phenomenology) are normally (but not always)  $F$ . Even if this more limited claim is true, it still allows for the possibility of moral perceptual experience. Consider again Harman's paradigm case. It is plausible that acts that look like boys torturing a cat by lighting it on fire are normally (but not always) morally wrong.

I also grant that there are plenty of circumstances in which a subject *cannot* have a perceptual experience as if an action were wrong. The case in which you see one person shoot another in a back alley might be such a case. But what if we alter the case a little: you watch one person threaten the other, demand money, and then shoot the victim. Here it is plausible that you can have a perceptual experience as if the action is morally wrong. And much the same sort of thing can be said for ordinary perceptual experiences. Upon walking into my office and having a perceptual experience with a certain phenomenology, you

may or may not have a perceptual experience as if my glass is full of Coke. After all, it would look the very same if it were Pepsi. But upon walking into the Coke Museum and having a phenomenologically identical experience, you may indeed have the perceptual experience as if a glass is full of Coke. The gist is that background conditions matter for representation. How they matter is a central concern of the next section.

#### **2.4.0 Moral Representation**

I have been at pains to show that it is possible to have a moral perceptual experience, and one of the key objections to my position claims that it is not possible for a perceptual experience to represent a moral property. I have argued that there is no reason to accept this claim. Furthermore, there is reason to think it's false: a number of contemporary philosophers agree with the more general thesis that an experience can represent a normative property. For example, Mandlebaum (1955) claims that *belonging* can be represented in a perceptual experience:

It is a basic fact of perceptual experience that some things belong or fit together, and that others do not. A curve may demand a certain completion and seem to reject all others; this completion appears as appropriate to the nature of the curve. Whatever be our explanatory hypothesis, the facts are incontrovertible. In perceptual experience we find things belonging together, demanding and rejecting certain completions, appropriately and inappropriately organized. (pp. 95-6)

Similarly, Michael Tye (2005) claims that the taste of chocolate is represented in experience as *good*, the smell of vomit is represented as *bad*, and that pain is represented as tissue damage that is *bad* for one:

To experience tissue damage as bad is to undergo an experience that represents that damage as bad. Accordingly, in my view, the affective dimension of pain is as much a part of the representational content of pain as the sensory dimension is. (2005a, p. 107)

Just as squareness is part of the representational content of the visual experience, so badness and goodness are within the representational contents of the relevant bodily and gustatory experiences. (2005b, p. 167)

If it is true that experiences in general are able to represent normative properties like belonging, good, and bad, this provides a *pro tanto* reason for thinking that it is at least possible that *perceptual* experiences represent *moral* properties.

Still, it would be nice to have a concrete argument for the claim that perceptual experiences can (and sometimes do) represent moral properties. I provide such an argument in this final section. Since representation is achieved by way of representational content (hereafter 'content'), I provide a reason for thinking that perceptual experiences can (and sometimes do) include moral content.

#### **2.4.1 Discovering the Content of a Perceptual Experience**

If there were an uncontentious method for identifying the contents of any given perceptual experience, I could argue for the possibility of moral perceptual experiences by simply applying this methodology to putative cases of moral perceptual experience. However, it turns out to be quite difficult to state an acceptable procedure for determining the content of a perceptual experience.<sup>46</sup>

In this section I show that there is no uncontentious method for determining the content of experience in the contemporary literature and that even if we accept

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<sup>46</sup> See Siegel (forthcoming).



any one of the contentious methodologies, there is no threat for the view that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.

One possibility for determining the content of an experience is introspection. When we have a certain experience, we can simply introspect the contents of the experience. This seems implausible. Perhaps introspection can tell us whether two perceptual experiences differ in their phenomenology, but it can't tell us the precise content of any given perceptual experience. If it could, the contemporary debate on the extent of perceptual content would be difficult to explain.

Another suggestion for discovering content exploits the link between perceptual experience and belief (Armstrong 1961, Pitcher 1971, Goldman 1977). According to this methodology, the contents of an experience can be discovered by examining the beliefs that the experience normally gives rise to. If an experience *E* causes the belief (or disposes the subject to believe) that the sun is rising, then at least part of the content of *E* is 'the sun is rising'. David Lewis (1980) makes precisely this suggestion in his first pass at isolating the content of a perceptual experience: "The content of the experience is, roughly, the content of the belief it tends to produce" (p. 239).

If this is a reliable method for determining the content of perceptual experiences, then it is obvious that some perceptual experiences have moral content. This is because it is quite plausible that humans often form (or are disposed to form) moral beliefs in response to certain perceptual experiences. This basic point is granted by Harman (1977):

If we say that observation has occurred whenever an opinion is a direct result of perception, we must allow that there is moral observation, because such an opinion can be a moral opinion as easily as any other sort (p. 5).

Lewis (1980) eventually rejects this methodology as too liberal. By making content subject-relative, it appears to assign content to perceptual experiences that intuitively they do not have. He proposes a refinement:

We should take the range of prior states that actually exist among us, and ask what is common to the impact of a given visual experience on all these states. Only if a certain belief would be produced in almost every case may we take its content as part of the content of the visual experience. (p. 240)

Instead of simply equating the content of a perceptual experience with the content of the beliefs that the experience gives rise to in a particular case, we should do some empirical work to discover all of the various beliefs that the perceptual experience produces in us, where 'us' indicates existing human subjects. If and only if a certain belief is produced in almost every case, is the content of that belief part of the content of that perceptual experience.

Lewis' proposal has two difficulties. First, content remains relative even for Lewis (albeit, not subject-relative) because he leaves open the possibility that a perceptual experience might have one content for one set of subjects and a different content for another set of subjects. Worse, the relativity is arbitrary. Why is it the *actually existing* human population that matters for determining content? Why not say that the content of a perceptual experience is the intersection of the beliefs that any *metaphysically possible* subject might form? or Westerners? or Americans?

Second, even if there is a satisfying answer to the relativity issue, contingent matters of fact imply that if Lewis' procedure for determining content is accurate, our perceptual experiences represent precious little. You cannot have a perceptual experience as if, say, '*that's* my house' because it's not the case that (almost) all of the 6-plus billion people in the world would form that belief as a response to a perceptual experience of your house. It seems that the most that we would agree on are colors, shapes, spatial arrangement, etc.<sup>47</sup> And yet it is plausible that I can have the perceptual knowledge that '*that's* my house' despite the fact that this content is not included in my perceptual experience.

This leaves us with the following dilemma: either Lewis' procedure is a good way of determining content or it is not. If so, then the content of a perceptual experience is irrelevant for perceptual knowledge. This is because I can have perceptual knowledge that '*that's* my house' even though my perceptual experience lacks this content. So even if an objector may be right that moral perceptual experiences do not (or cannot) occur, this is irrelevant for whether or not we have perceptual moral knowledge. On the other hand, if Lewis' procedure is *not* a good one for determining content, then we still lack a plausible method for determining whether or not a perceptual experience can have moral content.

My tentative conclusion is that the two most prominent methodologies in the contemporary literature for determining the content of a perceptual experience fail. Furthermore, even if we accept either of these methodologies,

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<sup>47</sup> Thanks to Brian Kierland for pointing out that there would be a wide overlap of beliefs concerning the instantiation of these low level properties.

neither threatens the view that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. This is because they either allow for moral content in perceptual experience or they imply that the content of a perceptual experience is irrelevant for perceptual knowledge. If I am to argue for the possibility of moral content in a perceptual experience, I shall have to do so without appeal to a general decision procedure for determining the content of an experience. I turn to this task in the next section.

#### **2.4.2 An Argument for Moral Content**

In the last section I concluded that there is no general methodology for determining the content of any given perceptual experience. Thus I cannot apply a general methodology to our putative case of moral perceptual experience to determine whether or not there is any moral content to the experience. Still, there is an argument available that shows that it is reasonable to believe that a perceptual experience can have moral content. The argument is fairly straightforward. It is widely recognized that changes in background conditions can change the phenomenology of a perceptual experience. Oftentimes, the best explanation for the change in phenomenology posits the addition of new content that is related to the change in background conditions. And since this same sort of contrast can be found in cases in which the background conditions are moral ones, in at least some cases the best explanation for the change in phenomenology posits the addition of moral content to the perceptual experience.

First, is it really true that background conditions can affect the phenomenology of an experience? Recent data from cognitive scientists seems to suggest so. For example, scientists recently monitored subjects with a functional MRI while they sampled wines that they believed to be different in price, though in reality each sample contained the same wine (Plassmann *et alia* 2007). Not surprisingly, the subjects reported that they enjoyed the sample that was marked higher in price. However, this self-report was corroborated by the MRI scans which showed that the subject's background belief actually affected the amount of pleasure that the subject experienced. The team of scientists concluded that "...marketing actions, such as changes in the price of a product, can affect neural representations of experienced pleasantness" (abstract).

One might grant that background conditions like beliefs can affect phenomenology in genera but be skeptical as to whether or not they can affect *perceptual* phenomenology. However, there are numerous examples of this phenomena in the contemporary philosophical literature. For example, there is something that it is like to hear a sentence spoken in Spanish when one does not understand the language. Later, after becoming fluent in the language, the qualia associated with the perceptual experience of hearing that very same sentence spoken in Spanish are quite different. In this case the difference is due to what we might call recognizability. Siewart (1998) writes that:

There is, I want to say, a difference between the way things look to us when they merely look somehow shaped, colored, and situated, and how they look to us when they look *recognizable* to us as belonging to certain general types or as certain individuals encountered in the past. (p. 256)

Siewart provides several examples. First, a sunflower will look different to us after we learn to identify it as a sunflower instead of merely a flower. Likewise, people and neighborhoods look different to us as we become more familiar with them. My perceptual experience of my house today differs in phenomenology from the perceptual experience of my house the first time I laid eyes on it.

Why do these objects look different over time? Here is Siewart's explanation:

...this difference in how things look is a difference that follows from a difference in the way it seems to us for it to look to us as it does. This is not just a matter of its looking to us as if things have colors, shapes, and positions that they did not look to us as if they had before. It has to do also with what aspects of shape, color, and position "stand out for us as significant," and "go together." (p. 256)

Siewart's suggestion, then, is that the perceptual experiences differ phenomenologically because different elements become salient to us over time. Whether this is an accurate explanation or not, each of us has experienced a change in the phenomenology of perceptual experiences.

Second, what kind of background conditions might affect the phenomenology of a perceptual experience? Suggestions from the contemporary literature include concepts, recognitional abilities, associations and even mere beliefs. For an example of the first, Peacocke (1992) notes that *concepts* often affect the content of a perceptual experience:

Once a thinker has acquired a perceptually individuated concept, his possession of that concept can causally influence what contents his experience possesses. If this were not so, we would be unable to account for differences which manifestly exist. (p. 89)

The differences which “manifestly exist” are cases like those mentioned earlier: a herpetologist can see that a snake is a copperhead whereas a novice cannot. And since changes in content are associated with changes in phenomenology, this shows that changes in concepts can cause changes in phenomenology.<sup>48</sup>

Michael DePaul (1993) provides an illustrative case of a *recognition ability*:

...a horse can canter in two different ways, depending upon which hind leg begins the sequence. A horse can canter on the left or right lead. Now the interesting thing about cantering, in the present context, is that even after I got the basic idea down, I could not “see” on which lead a horse was cantering. All I could see was a thundering beast, legs going every which way, and I could not sort it all out....So, although in one sense I was seeing everything I needed to, in a more important sense I was unable to “see” what I had to in order to apply the concept. After some experience...I got to the point where I could immediately “see” a horse’s lead, in just about the same way I could all along see whether a horse was walking, trotting, or cantering. (p. 203)

After mastering a certain ability, DePaul’s perceptual experience is different. He “sees” something new. What it’s like for him to see a horse canter before he learns to recognize a lead and afterwards is different.

As an example of the third candidate background condition, Goldman (1977) presents the following case of *association*:

Rheumatic aches are sometimes caused by drops in atmospheric pressure, drops that characteristically precede rain. A person who first experiences such aches would not be said to ‘perceive’

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<sup>48</sup> What is the nature of the connection between phenomenology and content? The issue will be addressed more fully below, but for now it’s enough to note that many philosophers think that the two are tightly connected. For example, strong representationalists think that the content and phenomenology of a perceptual experience are identical. Others think that perceptual experiences have a particular content in virtue of their particular phenomenology where a change in the one implies a change in the other and vice-versa. It is a minority view that phenomenology is irrelevant to what a perceptual experience represents.

anything, at least no external state of the world. But if he gradually associates the aches with the onset of rain, we shall come to think of him as *perceiving* or *sensing* the onset of rain. (p. 271)

Finally, Peacocke (1983) argues that the relevant background condition might be as simple as a *belief*:

You may walk into your sitting-room and seem to hear rain falling outside. Then you notice that someone has left the stereo system on, and realize that the sound you hear is that of applause at the end of a concert. It happens to many people that after realizing this, the sound comes to be heard as applause: the content of the experience is influenced by that of judgment. (p. 6)

In this case, the noise is heard differently as a result of gaining a belief. Initially the noise sounded like rain, but after gaining the belief about the radio, it sounds like applause. In each of these cases a background condition affects the phenomenology of later perceptual experiences.<sup>49</sup>

Third—and crucial for the argument—this change in phenomenology is often best explained by positing the addition of a new content to the perceptual experience.<sup>50</sup> In fact, in many of the cases just listed, the philosophers simply conclude that the change in background conditions changes the content of the perceptual experience. For instance, in the Goldman case, the subject's association of rheumatic aches with the onset of rain allows him to perceive the

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<sup>49</sup> This conclusion might be rejected on the grounds that if two perceptual experiences differ in either phenomenology or content, then they are not the same. Thus background conditions cannot alter the perceptual experience. This narrow individuation of perceptual experiences is attractive, but it adds undue complexity to the explanation. We may say that either one and the same perceptual experience comes to have a different phenomenology or content OR say that the background conditions enable the subject to have a *different* perceptual experience than that had before gaining the requisite background condition. Either will work for my purposes. Thanks to Brian Kierland for pressing this worry.

<sup>50</sup> Note that some philosophers (e.g. representationalists about phenomenology) are already committed to the view that a change in phenomenology entails a change in content. This abductive inference is aimed at convincing those who allow that phenomenology and representation can come apart.



onset of rain (where perceiving the onset of rain would require something like ‘the onset of rain’ to be represented in the associated perceptual experience). Before this association, the requisite information just “wasn’t there.” But after the association, the perceptual experience was informative with regard to this fact—it came to represent the onset of rain. Similarly, Peacocke concludes that “the content of the experience is influenced by that of judgment.”

Suppose it is conceded that the content of the perceptual experiences changes as a result of the alterations in background conditions. What else, aside from the change in phenomenology, would explain the change in content? Is it possible that two perceptual experiences can be identical in terms of phenomenology and yet have different contents?<sup>51</sup> Imagine how strange this would be: you could have two perceptual experiences that felt qualitatively identical, but one would represent something that the other did not. That’s bizarre.

I think that there is a tight connection between phenomenology and content. If two perceptual experiences differ in phenomenology, they differ in content as well (and vice-versa). Thus even if a reader is unconvinced that the change in content *best explains* the change in phenomenology, it still seems reasonable to think that changes in phenomenology correspond to changes in content, and this is all that is really needed for my argument for moral content.

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<sup>51</sup> I actually think that this is possible if the perceptual experiences are had by different subjects or by the same subject at very different times. For example, I think it’s possible for me and an alien to have perceptual experiences that are phenomenologically identical but which represent ‘red’ to me and ‘hot’ to the alien (the example is Peter Markie’s). But the vital question here is whether or not two perceptual experiences can be identical in terms of phenomenology and yet have different content for the same perceptual subject at the same time, etc.

Susanna Siegel (2006a) provides the following example that illustrates this point:

Suppose you have never seen a pine tree before, and are hired to cut down all the pine trees in a grove containing 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. Like the recognitional disposition you gain, the salience of the trees emerges gradually. Gaining this recognitional disposition is reflected in a phenomenological difference between the visual experiences you had before and after the recognitional disposition was fully formed. (p. 491)

After gaining the ability, pine trees simply looked different to you than they did before. Additionally, only after gaining the ability did the subject have perceptual knowledge that *that's* a pine tree. But having the perceptual knowledge that *X* is *F* requires having a perceptual experience as if *X* is *F*, and having a perceptual experience as if *X* is *F* requires a mental representation as if *X* is *F*. So, the best explanation for the change in phenomenology is that your perceptual experiences now represent the tree as a pine tree whereas it did not so represent the tree before you gained the ability.<sup>52</sup> And since this change in content was associated by a change in phenomenology, it is reasonable to think that the change in content is the best explanation for the change in phenomenology. The experience felt different because it represented different things to be the case.

Fourth, and finally, we can make the same inference to the best explanation in moral cases as well. What we need is a set of contrast cases in

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<sup>52</sup> Is it possible that the subject's perceptual experiences represented the tree as a pine tree before he gained the recognitional ability? If so, then our perceptual experiences have contents that are beyond our ken in the sense that they provide us with information that we are not in a position to recognize, and if so, then such experiences might provide us with moral content despite the fact that we cannot recognize this information.

which a perceptual experience is phenomenally different as a result of a change in background conditions where those background conditions make explicit use of moral content. Consider the following:

Albert grew up on a farm where he and his family ate meat regularly. The fact that meat was served at a meal went almost unnoticed by Albert—it was certainly not something worth pausing over. But during his first year of college, Albert is exposed to various arguments for ethical vegetarianism. He comes to believe not just that eating meat is wrong but that it is a serious wrong worthy of moral disdain. Home for Christmas break, he sits down to a meal with his family and has the perceptual experience as if his mother is serving ham. Despite the fact that Albert's mother has served him ham hundreds of times in the past, this experience is different in its phenomenology than previous instances.

In the case of Albert, the phenomenal change accompanies a change in belief from thinking that eating meat is morally permissible to the belief that eating meat is morally wrong. Cases like this are easy to find. In my own life it's easy to find cases of experiences that feel different to me after I have learned something new or gained a new ability, and this holds true of moral beliefs as well.<sup>53</sup>

My contention is that since we explain the change in phenomenology in other cases by positing the addition of content that is related to the alteration in background conditions, we ought to extend this explanation to the moral cases as well. In the case of Siegel's lumberjack, his perceptual experiences differ in phenomenology after learning to identify pine trees. We explain this by claiming that his perceptual experiences now represent pine trees. Similarly, in the case of Albert, his perceptual experiences differ in phenomenology and content after

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<sup>53</sup> For another contemporary example of moral contrast cases, see Sarah McGrath 2004, pp. 224-5.

learning that eating meat is a serious moral wrong. We can explain this by claiming that his perceptual experiences now represent moral wrongness.<sup>54</sup>

An objection to this argument goes as follows. In some cases we can explain a change in phenomenology without positing a change in content, and it looks like we can do this in the moral case as well. In the case of Albert, his perceptual experience represents the same things before and after his course on ethics, e.g. the serving of meat. In order to account for the difference in phenomenology, we can simply note that Albert has a different emotional reaction to this same content. And more generally in similar moral cases, there is no need to posit a difference in content. Instead it's that the subject comes to have a different emotional response to the very same content that was present in the initial experience. A mere emotional surge explains the phenomenal difference in the moral contrast cases, and there is thus no need to posit the addition of moral content to explain the difference.

I think there is reason to prefer my explanation to this latter explanation. First, at least some philosophers have favored explanations similar to mine with respect to the observation of aesthetic properties. Hume presses an objection against the observation of aesthetic properties that is analogous to the present objection to the observation of moral properties. In the moral case, the objector claims that it's merely a change in emotions that explains the change in overall

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<sup>54</sup> Note that there are 3 positions in logical space with regard to the relation between phenomenology and content. On the first, every aspect of phenomenology is an aspect of content. This view is known as strong representationalism. On the second, some but not all aspects of phenomenology are aspects of content. On the third, no aspect of phenomenology is an aspect of content. The inference to the best explanation posited here will be more attractive if one is inclined to either of the first two positions.

phenomenology. In Hume's case, he claims that our seeing something as beautiful is a result of our emotional response that thing. Just as there is no representation of moral qualities in the first case, there is no representation of aesthetic qualities in the latter case.

Consider David McNoughton's (1988) response to Hume:

I do not see an expanse of coloured cloud, which is not itself seen as beautiful, and then experience a thrill of pleasure to which I give the name beauty. The beauty of the sunset is woven into the fabric of my experience of it. I see the sunset as beautiful....I am thrilled by the sunset because I see it to be beautiful; I do not take it to be beautiful because I, and others, are thrilled by it. (p. 56)

McNoughton's response echoes an earlier claim of Aristotle's: "We desire the object because it seems good to us, rather than the object's seeming good to us because we desire it" (*Metaphysics* 1072a). My response to the objector to moral representation takes much the same form: we have an emotional reaction to the scene because we see it as wicked (or virtuous or whatever), not vice versa.

Second, I think that there is a difference between cases like my paradigm case and those that employ *post hoc* emotions to account for the change in phenomenology. Though it's difficult to pinpoint, the difference in feel seems *internal* to the experience in the first case and not in the second. For example, imagine being fully satiated from a meal and having a perceptual experience as if a man is bringing you a full plate of food. Now imagine having the experience while being desperately hungry. It seems plausible that there would be some difference in overall phenomenology in the two cases. This kind of difference seems best explained by *post hoc* emotions. The perceptual experience is the

same in both cases, and in each case it represents, for example, a man bringing a plate of food. The difference in feel is accounted for by noting that you have no desire for the food in the first case and a great desire for it in the latter.

Is the case of Albert more like the pine tree example or the plate of food example? I think it is more like the pine tree case in that there is something internal to the perceptual experience itself that seems different. The trees look different to the lumberjack after he gains the recognitional ability. Similarly, the act of serving meat looks different to Albert after his first semester at college. Thus, if we explain the change in phenomenology in the pine tree and other cases by positing the addition of new content that is related to the relevant background conditions, we should do so in the moral cases as well.

I conclude that it is possible for perceptual experiences to represent moral properties, and this completes my case for the claim that moral perceptual experiences are possible. But are they actual? In order to establish that these moral perceptual experiences were actual, I would need to demonstrate that at least some people actually have them. Instead of doing sociology, I shall simply note two things. First, I can report that I myself have had such experiences. I think that this provides at least a modicum of evidence for the claim that moral perceptual experiences are actual.

Second, it is plausible that others have had similar experiences. As a point in fact, I think that this is an everyday occurrence for most of us. John Greco (2000) agrees:

Seeing that an action is wrong, or that a man is untrustworthy, or that a child is innocent seems to be an adequate description of a

fairly common sort of occurrence....a person often “strikes” us as trustworthy; she has a certain look to her, which we probably could not articulate, on the basis of which we form our beliefs and act. Or perhaps a voice sounds insincere, or caring, or threatening. (p. 234)

So without a reason to distrust the self-reports of others, I think that this is enough to establish a *pro tanto* case in favor the claim that moral perceptual experiences are not just possible but actual.

## Chapter 3: Moral Perception

*“What plays, in moral reasoning, the role played in science by observation?”*

*I propose the answer: ‘Observation’.*

~ Richard Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist”<sup>55</sup>

### 3.0 Introduction

In chapter 2 I argued that perception has both internal and external constraints, and I argued that putative cases of moral perception meet the internal constraint, viz. it is possible for a human agent to have a moral perceptual experience. However, mere perceptual experiences that *P* are not sufficient for knowledge that *P*, so more must be done to show that at least some of our moral knowledge is perceptual. Perhaps perceptual knowledge requires perception in the factive sense. In this chapter I argue that putative cases of moral perception meet the external constraint on perception. Combined with the results from chapter 2, this shows that moral perception is possible.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. In §3.1, I identify the external constraint on perception. In §3.2, I offer an extended argument for the claim that putative cases of moral perception meet the external constraint on perception. I do this by showing that moral perception is possible regardless of whether moral properties turn out to be secondary natural properties (§3.2.1), non-secondary natural properties (§3.2.2), or non-natural properties (§3.2.3). In §3.3, I entertain

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<sup>55</sup> See Sayre-McCord 1988 p. 206.



objections to my arguments for the claim that putative cases of moral perception meet the external constraint on perception.

### 3.1 External Constraints on Perception

What are the external constraints on perception? What external conditions must be met in order for a subject *S* to perceive that *X* is *F*? Without reproducing each of the accounts of perception recounted in §2.1, what follows are the external elements of each account. According to Reid, there must be an external object of perception that really exists, and there must be a causal process that starts with the object of perception and culminates with the subject's belief in the object.<sup>56</sup> According to Chisholm, a subject perceives that something is *F* only if there is a thing which is *F* and that thing properly stimulates the subject's sense organs.<sup>57</sup> According to Jackson, a subject perceives an object only if the subject's perceptual state is a causal result of the object.<sup>58</sup> Finally, according to Huemer, a subject perceives an object only if there is an object that at least roughly satisfies the content of the subject's perceptual experience and that object also causes the perceptual experience.<sup>59</sup>

These accounts of the external constraints of perception have a great deal in common. First, each requires that the object of perception exist and bear the property in question. If a subject *S* perceives that *X* is *F*, it must follow that *X* really exist and that *X* really bear the property *F*. If *X* does not exist or if *X* is not

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<sup>56</sup> See *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay I, Chapter I; Essay II, Chapter XX; and Essay IV, Chapter 1. See also van Cleve 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Chisholm 1957, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson 1977, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Huemer 2001, p. 57. Some of these accounts of perception are intended as analyses of perception *de re* (e.g. Jackson's and Huemer's) whereas others are more plausibly read as analyses of perception *de dicto* (e.g. Chisholm's and Greco's). I rely on both sets as a plausible starting point for determining the external constraints on perception *de dicto*.

*F*, then it is not possible for a subject to perceive that *X* is *F*. This external condition ensures the factivity of perception. Second, the accounts are united in requiring some sort of causal connection between the object of perception and the subject's perceptual experience. This sort of causal requirement is standard in contemporary accounts of perception (Ryle 1949, Grice 1961, Strawson 1974, Goldman 1977).<sup>60</sup> The need for such a constraint is illustrated in Grice's familiar pillar case:

It might be that it looked to me as if there were a certain sort of pillar in a certain direction at a certain distance, and there might actually be such a pillar in that place; but if, unknown to me, there were a mirror interposed between myself and the pillar, which reflected a numerically different though similar pillar, it would certainly be incorrect to say that I saw the first pillar, and correct to say that I saw the second; and it is extremely tempting to explain this linguistic fact by saying that the first pillar was, and the second was not, causally irrelevant to the way things looked to me. (p. 142)

Why doesn't Grice perceive the pillar in this case? An inference to the best explanation suggests that what is lacking is a causal connection between the subject and object.

As a first pass, consider the following external constraints on perception:

A subject *S* perceives that *X* is *F* only if:

1. *X* is *F* (the factive condition) and
2. *S*'s perceptual experience is appropriately caused (the causal condition).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Note, however, that there are some who deny the causal requirement; for example, see Snowdon 1981 and Hyman 1992. If it turns out that perception does not have a causal requirement, then the goal of this chapter is otiose.

<sup>61</sup> One might think that this condition should read "...appropriately caused by the fact that *X* is *F*." I leave this open at this point since it is at least plausible that some perceptual experiences as if

Following the paradigm accounts of perception noted above, I shall assume that meeting both (1) and (2) is sufficient to meet the external constraint on perception more generally. So the goal of this chapter is to show that both of these conditions are met in putative cases of moral perception.

While the factive condition is straightforward, the causal condition is underspecified. What, more exactly, constitutes an appropriate cause? Alston (1991) thinks that the possibilities of determining a precise account of this necessary condition are bleak:

The causal contribution a seen object makes to the production of visual experience...is different from the causal contribution a felt object makes to the tactile experience, different from the causal contribution a heard object makes to the aural experience, and so on. And how do we tell what the crucial causal contribution is for each modality? We have no a priori insight into this. We cannot abstract from everything we have learned from perception and still ascertain how an object must be causally related to a visual experience in order to be what is seen in that experience. (pp. 64-5)

While it is plausible that Alston's skepticism is warranted, we can consider various cases and at least make some progress by ruling out cases in which, intuitively, the subject in question is not perceiving the object in question. For example, suppose that because a scientist smells that a pot of coffee is brewing he decides to stimulate a brain in a vat to have a perceptual experience as if coffee is brewing. Even though the perceptual experience was caused by the fact that coffee was actually brewing, this won't count as a case of perception. We can refer to this kind of causal connection as a 'deviant causal chain', and insist that deviant causal chains will not meet the causal condition on

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*X* is *F* are not caused by the fact that *X* is *F*-e.g. perhaps my perceptual experience as if the table is brown is not caused by the fact that the table is brown (since brown-ness is a secondary quality) but by the physical constitution of the table itself.

perception.<sup>62</sup> But there seems to be no non-question-begging way to define a deviant causal chain. Huemer (2001) suggests that this fact is not a reason to dismiss a causal requirement on perception:

I do not think that there is any ground for doubt about the causal theory of perception—that is, that perceiving an object is having the object cause (in a certain way) one to have a perceptual experience representing it. And the question of how to define deviant causal chains is not a task specifically for the theory of perception. (p. 65)

Additionally, it is not clear how the causal condition must be tailored to meet cases of perception *de dicto* as opposed to perception *de re*. The paradigm accounts of perception require a causal connection (or causal dependency) between the perceiver's mental state and the object of perception. But in putative cases of moral perception, there is nothing unique about the objects of perception. All of the following can bear moral properties: persons, actions, events, states of affairs, etc., and each of these can be an object of perception.<sup>63</sup> For example, I can hear my mother (a person), see the batter hit the ball (an action), see the homerun (an event), or hear the ocean waves lapping the shore (a state of affairs). So it initially appears that putative cases of moral perception can meet the causal condition easily.

But it might be objected that perception *de dicto* requires something a bit more than the paradigm accounts of perception mention. If a subject is to perceive that *X* is *F*, perhaps it is not enough for the subject to merely be in

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<sup>62</sup> David Lewis provides a series of interesting cases involving deviant causal chains in Lewis 1980.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Markie has objected that it is plausible that only objects (and not states of affairs, etc.) can serve as the objects of perception *de re*. It's not clear to me that this affects anything that I say here since what is really at issue in putative cases of moral perception is the possibility of perception *de dicto* and not perception *de re*.

causal contact with *X*; perhaps he must also be in contact with the *F*-ness of *X*. For example, in order to perceive that the table is heavy, it's not enough for the table to cause a certain kind of perceptual experience in me. It must be the *heaviness* of the table that causes the experience if the case is to count as perception *de dicto*.<sup>64</sup> In this case, the live issue for present purposes is whether or not a perceived property must be causally efficacious and whether or not moral properties ever meet this burden.

While I think these considerations are worth entertaining, Chisholming an account of appropriate causation would take me too far afield for the purposes of this chapter. I propose to simply stick with the account of the external constraint outlined above with two caveats. First, since the account of a causal condition is underspecified, I shall argue that cases of moral perception meet the causal condition only by argument by analogy with paradigm cases of non-moral perception. If I can find cases of non-moral perception in which the causal contribution of both the object and property is relevantly similar to the causal contribution of the object and moral property in a case of moral perception, I shall take myself to have discharged my burden of proof. Second, I take all of the following to be plausible instances of non-moral perception:

- 1) I see that the table is brown.
- 2) I feel that the box is empty.
- 3) I see that it's dark outside.

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<sup>64</sup> Again, as noted in the introduction, the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* perception collapses when the two are interchangeable in translation. Since this is so, certain cases of perception *de re* might also have the same requirement. For example, in order to perceive of the table that it is heavy, one might require that the heaviness of the table cause my perceptual experience.

- 4) I see that the knife is sharp.
- 5) I hear that *that's* a cat.
- 6) I hear that the speaker is a woman.
- 7) I perceive that my mother is angry.

Since I take all of these cases as examples of perception, however the causal condition is to be construed, it must respect the fact that these examples count as genuine cases of perception. Note that I need not assume anything epistemic at this point; in particular I need not assume that instances (1)-(7) are sufficient for belief, perceptual knowledge, perceptual justification, etc. I claim only that it is often true that humans have perceptual tokens that are instances of these more general types.

### **3.2.0 Causation and Perception**

This section traces a long argument for the conclusion that putative cases of moral perception meet the external condition on perception *simpliciter*. If the case is a good one, then—since I showed that the internal constraint on perception can be met in chapter 2—I will have made a successful *prima facie* case for the possibility of moral perception. And again, whether moral perception ever actually occurs depends on a few empirical claims that I cannot establish here, though they seem eminently plausible.

Take again Harman's putative case of moral perception. You look at the hoodlums and can see that the action is wrong. In order to show that this scenario meets the external constraint on perception, I need to show that the factive condition is met (i.e. the action is, in fact, wrong) and that the causal condition is met (i.e. your perceptual experience of the action's being wrong was

appropriately caused, whatever that amounts to). In what follows, I will simply assume that the factive condition is met in the putative cases of moral perception that I consider. I do this for two reasons. First, as noted in the introduction, my argument for moral knowledge assumes that moral realism is true. I make this assumption because an argument for moral realism would take me too far afield. It is an interesting question whether, granting moral realism, it would be possible to perceive moral properties. One might object that this assumption begs the question against the moral anti-realist. One reason for being an anti-realist about moral facts is the lack of a plausible story about how we might know of such facts, and if a moral epistemology simply assumes that such facts exist, this is question begging. However, note that I am not employing moral perception as an argument for moral realism (i.e. moral perception occurs, if moral perception occurs, then—since perception is factive—there are moral facts, therefore moral realism is true). That would certainly beg the question against moral anti-realists. Instead, I am arguing only that if moral realism were true, the existence of moral perception (and eventually perceptual moral knowledge) should not be surprising. And this is enough to undercut the argument for moral anti-realism that relies on the premise that even if moral facts existed there would be no way to know about them.

The second reason for assuming that the factive condition is met in putative cases of moral perception is methodological. Note that the parallel assumption is one that is routinely made in accounts of external world perception. Imagine that I were arguing for the conclusion that humans can

perceive trees. It would be unreasonable to insist that I provide an independent argument for the conclusion that trees exist. For one thing, my primary reason for thinking that trees exist is the fact that I perceive them! Likewise, it would be unreasonable to require me to provide an independent argument for the conclusion that moral facts exist before allowing me to proceed to my account of moral perception. Instead of defending the factive condition, the remainder of this section is devoted to showing that putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition.

### **3.2.1 Moral Properties as Secondary Natural Properties**

Intuitively, our moral beliefs have very different causal origins than our perceptual beliefs. This point is made forcefully by Griffin (1996):

With perceptual beliefs, we have reason to think that we are to some extent passive recipients of an independent reality....The causal story of our ethical beliefs is generally much more tangled, much less easily established, than the story of our perceptual beliefs (p. 14)

Is this difference between perceptual beliefs and moral beliefs an essential one?

Might a moral belief have the same kind of causal history as a perceptual belief?

How might putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition?

One way in which the causal history of a moral belief might differ from the causal history of an external world belief is that the latter is ultimately caused by some external world fact while the former is not ultimately caused by any moral fact. The putative problem is that moral perception is impossible because moral properties are not able to enter into causal relations with our perceptual faculties. Moral properties are causally impotent. What if we grant that moral properties



are causally impotent? Is it true that this implies that moral perception is impossible?

Not at all. This is because it is possible to have perception *de dicto* of the instantiation of causally impotent properties. Take the first paradigm case of perception that I noted in §3.1: I see that the table is brown. In this case, it seems obvious enough that the table causes my perceptual experience, but, as a secondary natural property, the *color* of the table is causally impotent. Colors are—in some sense of the word—not “in” the objects at all. So it seems that we can perceive that the table is brown despite the fact that the brownness, *per se*, make no causal contribution to our perceptual experiences.

Perhaps, then, moral properties are like color properties. If moral properties were secondary natural properties, then this would pave the way for showing that moral perception is possible despite the fact that moral properties make no causal contribution to the perceptual process. Hume was perhaps the first to suggest that moral properties are subjective in this way. He writes that moral value:

..lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, maybe compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind...( *Treatise* Bk. III, Part I, § I)

In contemporary philosophy, the most significant attempt to show that values are secondary natural properties was made by John McDowell.<sup>65</sup> McDowell (1998a, 1998b) advocates a view in which values (including aesthetic and moral values) are secondary qualities in order to make a metaphysical point.<sup>66</sup> What he wants to show is that values are real in the same sense that colors are real. Just as we ought not be anti-realists about color, we ought not be anti-realists about value.

McDowell defines a secondary quality as follows:

A secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual experience: specifically, an appearance characterizable by using a word for the property itself to say how the object perceptually appears. (p. 133, 1998b)

A secondary quality, then, is a species of a subjective quality that has an essential connection to perception. Color is the paradigm example of a secondary quality. For an object to be red, for example, is for it to be such that it would be described as red if observed by a certain type of being under a certain set of circumstances.

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<sup>65</sup> Gilbert Harman suggests an analogy between colors and values 20 years before McDowell, though he ultimately rejects the analogy. See Harman 1977, p. 13 and p. 22. David Wiggins also defends a variety of subjectivism that he calls sensible subjectivism in Wiggins 1998.

<sup>66</sup> McDowell's thesis that *all* values are *secondary* qualities evolved from the much more modest (and plausible) claim that all *aesthetic* values are *subjective* qualities. His motivation for this latter view is an attempt to be fair to the phenomenological experience of aesthetic value. McDowell (1998a) rightly asserts that "aesthetic experience typically presents itself, at least in part, as a confrontation with value: an awareness of value as something residing in an object and available to be encountered" (p. 112). So if we can explain aesthetic value in a way that explains our pre-theoretical intuitions, *ceteris paribus* we should prefer this explanation. Later, McDowell (1998b) expands his thesis from the claim that aesthetic values are subjective qualities to the claim that *all* values are *secondary* qualities. His motivation for this extension remains the same: "ordinary evaluative thought presents itself as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world" (p. 131).

It is obvious how this move shows how moral perception can meet the causal condition on perception. Colors, *per se*, are causally inert. It is the primary qualities that “stand under” the secondary qualities that are causally efficacious. And yet it’s obvious that we can perceive colors (or better, we can perceive *that* something is of a certain color). Likewise, if values are secondary qualities, then it is the primary qualities that “stand under” the values that are causally efficacious while the values themselves are causally inert. However, just as we can perceive colors, we can also perceive values. This is an important point: if moral properties are secondary properties, then it is possible for some observer to meet the external constraints on perception.

However, this conclusion leaves open whether or not normal humans ever meet the external constraints on perception. We cannot assume that just because *some* observer will meet the conditions, normal humans will be able to do so. Here’s the problem. I grant that if moral properties were secondary qualities, this would show how putative cases of moral perception could meet the causal condition. However, I think that this way of saving moral perception comes with a prohibitively high cost. While some of the objections levied against the view that moral properties are secondary properties are bad ones,<sup>67</sup> there is one objection against the view that moral qualities are secondary qualities that is telling.<sup>68</sup> This objection might be called the relativity objection. The basic objection goes as follows: moral properties are not dependent on the contingencies of sentient observers. But secondary qualities *are* essentially

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<sup>67</sup> For a sampling of some of the bad objections, see Harmon 1977, p. 22; Wright 1988; and Peonides 1996.

<sup>68</sup> Versions of this objection have been levied by Sorell 1985; Milgram 1999; and McGinn 1983.

dependent on the contingencies of sentient observers. So, moral properties are not secondary qualities. For example, Tom Sorrell (1985) complains that “were values subjective after the manner of the secondary qualities, then ascriptions of rightness or wrongness would similarly depend for their truth on the sensitivities of the normal human constitution” (p. 183). Whether or not something is red essentially depends on how normal humans would be disposed to react in the presence of that object. Moral properties don’t depend on observers in this way. Colin McGinn (1983) echoes this worry when he notes that “if moral truth consists in facts about moral reactions, as the comparison with secondary qualities alleges, then clearly differences of moral reaction will give rise to a relativity in moral truth” (p. 153).

There is a way to respond to this objection, though it comes at a high epistemological cost that I suggested earlier might eliminate the possibility that normal humans meet the external constraint on perception. The response itself is straightforward. According to the thesis that values are secondary qualities, certain objects or states of affairs are valuable if and only if they elicit a certain kind of phenomenal experience in a certain kind of sentient being. The key to avoiding the relativity objection is to simply restrict the scope of sentient beings so that only *appropriately receptive* subjects count.<sup>69</sup> For example, the fact that a

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<sup>69</sup> I note here that while this addendum to the view that moral properties are secondary properties allows it to avoid the relativity objection, there is a potentially more potent objection in the offing. Peter Markie has suggested that the truth of ascriptions of rightness or wrongness won’t depend on the sensibilities of ANY group of subjects, no matter how restricted. The objection is parallel to that of a Euthyphro objection: it is the rightness of the act that prescribes the subject’s reaction, not *vice versa*. Brian Kierland worries that this sort of analysis is circular: wrongness is the property that causes such and such a reaction in appropriately receptive subjects where appropriately receptive subjects are just those that have such and such a

colored object doesn't induce a phenomenal experience in someone who is colorblind does not count against the claim that the object is colored or that colors are secondary properties. Instead, we restrict the range of observers to those that have a certain kind of functionality. Likewise, the fact that a certain state of affairs doesn't induce a phenomenal experience in someone who is morally "imperceptive" does not count against the claim that the state of affairs is valuable or that value is a secondary property. Perhaps many of us are moral analogs of the colorblind person.

This move saves the account against the relativity objection. Perhaps it's true that *normal* humans have varying reactions to valuable states of affairs despite the fact that the value of the states of affairs is constant. Perhaps, only God counts as an appropriately receptive subject. However, this move raises an epistemic difficulty. The problem, in short, is this: if there is no essential connection between moral properties and the reactions of *normal* humans, then the fact that moral properties are secondary properties does not elucidate how normal humans might have moral perception. By responding to the relativity objection by restricting the class of appropriate observers, we likewise restrict the possibility of moral perception to this class of appropriate observers. In other words, if only appropriate observers will have a phenomenal reaction in the presence of moral facts and normal humans aren't members of the set of appropriate observers, then normal humans won't meet the causal constraint on perception.

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reaction to the property of wrongness. I agree that this is circular, but we need not settle for this account of 'appropriately receptive'.

But perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps normal humans can train themselves in certain ways so that they are *more* responsive to moral facts in the way that members of the set of appropriate observers are. A given human might be like an appropriate observer in some respects but not others and thus able to have moral experiences in some instances but not others. Thus, whether it is possible for normal humans to have moral perception on the present view of moral properties depends on whether normal humans are included in the set of appropriate observers. The important conclusion for current purposes is simply this: if moral properties turn out to be secondary natural properties, then there is no principled reason for thinking that the causal constraint on perception cannot be met. Indeed, arguing that the causal constraint cannot be met requires saying something substantive about why normal humans are not sufficiently like the members of the class of appropriate observers. And since my thesis requires only that some humans experience moral perception, the objector has a strong burden of proof indeed—he must show that *no* human is ever sufficiently similar to the members of the appropriately receptive class. I think the prospects for such an argument are dim.

### **3.2.2 Moral Properties as Non-Secondary Natural Properties**

We have seen that putative cases of moral perception meet the causal condition if moral properties are secondary natural properties. But what if they are not? Again, my goal is to show that there is nothing unique about a putative case of moral perception when it comes to the causal constraint, but a common objection to moral perception hinges on the fact that moral properties are causally

impotent. Besides the color case, are there other examples of perception in which the instantiated property is causally impotent?

Consider the second and third paradigm examples of perception from §3.1: I feel that the box is empty and I see that it's dark outside. As in the color case, the emptiness of the box does no causal work in the explanation of my perceptual experience.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, it's not the darkness, *per se*, that stands in a causal chain with my eyes. In both cases it is an absence that is detected. As in the case of colors, this seems to show is that it is possible for a subject to perceive that *X* is *F* even when the *F*-ness of the *X* contributes nothing to the causal explanation of the subject's perceptual experience as if *X* were *F*. And if that's correct, then even if it is true that moral properties are causally inert, this alone would not constitute an objection to the possibility of moral perception.

However, it is contentious whether or not the emptiness of the box or the absence of light can serve as causes.<sup>71</sup> If it turns out that absences or omissions can be causes, then the case of feeling that the box is empty or seeing that it's dark would no longer serve to bolster my case for moral perception. Instead of relying on the view that absences and omissions are not causes, consider the next few paradigm examples of perception from §3.1: I see that the knife is sharp, I hear that *that* is a cat, I hear that the speaker is a woman. All of these cases involve the perception of a non-secondary natural property. A natural property is, roughly, the kind of property that can be studied in the hard sciences

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<sup>70</sup> This is not plausible if one grants that absences can be causes or if one endorses a counterfactual view of causation. I deal with these objections in what follows.

<sup>71</sup> See Menzies 1989, Lewis 2000 and 2004, Thomson 2003, and Beebe 2004. See also Michael Hartsoc's "A Defense of Absences as Causes" (manuscript).

or any other property that is either identical with or reducible to a property that can be studied in the hard sciences. So, for example, being a cat is a property that is reducible to certain physical facts. The same goes for being sharp and being a woman.

What is the causal connection between the knife and my perceptual apparatus or between the cat or the speaker and my perceptual apparatus? In each case, the underlying physical aspects of the object causally impact my eyes and ears in such a way that they produce the relevant perceptual experience in me. It is plausible that in each case it's not the property being instantiated (e.g. being a cat) that figures in the causal story (unless these properties are identical to the collection of lower-level properties). Instead, these properties are reducible to lower-level properties that stand in the causal chain. The knife is sharp because of certain lower-level physical facts, and it is some subset of these physical facts that causes me to have a perceptual experience as if the knife were sharp.

Much like the case of feeling that the box is empty, despite the fact that it's not the property of being a cat, *per se*, that enters into the causal story, it is obvious that I can hear that something is a cat. This opens the way for another account of how moral perceptual experiences might be appropriately caused in such a way that they meet the causal constraint on perception. The solution requires that moral facts be natural facts (a view I shall call 'moral naturalism'). If moral facts are either identical with or reducible to some sub-set of properties that can be studied in the hard sciences, then, since we think that these kinds of



properties can enter into causal relations with human agents, there is no longer a principled reason for thinking that putative cases of moral perception cannot meet the causal condition. Just as my perceptual experience as if the knife is sharp can be appropriately caused by some sub-set of the lower-level physical properties that being sharp is reducible to, so too, my perceptual experience as if the action is wrong can be appropriately caused by some sub-set of the lower-level physical properties to which being wrong is reducible.

In order to see how a commitment to moral naturalism makes moral perception possible, consider a silly example: suppose the only thing that is morally good is being satiated with food and the only thing morally evil is starving. On this view, the possibility of moral perception is straightforward. Just as you meet the causal condition when you see that someone is starving, you meet the causal condition when you see that the state of affairs is morally evil. This is because the property of being evil is identical with (or reducible to) the property of starving. The causal contribution of the property of starving is identical to the causal contribution of the evil. Of course, this alone is not sufficient for moral perception (e.g. both cases presuppose certain concepts, background knowledge, etc. as shown in §2.3). But the important point for this chapter is to show that the causal condition can be met in putative cases of moral perception, and this simplistic illustration demonstrates that the move to moral naturalism is a way to meet the causal constraint on perception. Even if the correct moral theory were much more complex, as long as the moral properties remain identical with or reducible to some set of natural properties, there is no

principled reason for thinking that putative cases moral perception cannot meet the causal condition.

Michael Huemer (2005) objects to this strategy for defending moral perception. He argues that an appeal to natural properties must go as follows:

- 1) I can perceive that  $X$  is  $N$  (where ' $N$ ' indicates some natural property).
- 2) Good =  $N$ .
- 3) So, I can perceive that  $X$  is good. (p. 86)

This argument, as Huemer is quick to point out, is unsound. The inference from (1) and (2) to (3) is invalid because substitutions of identicals are not truth preserving within an intentional context. I may believe that George Orwell wrote *1984*, but it doesn't follow from this that I believe that Eric Blair wrote *1984* even though Orwell and Blair are identical.

However, Huemer's position is a straw man. One might allow, with Huemer, that substitution of identicals is truth preserving only in cases of perception *de re*. If I perceive Orwell and Orwell is identical to Blair, then I perceive Blair. We might deny that perceiving that a man is drinking tea is sufficient for perceiving that the president of the college is drinking tea even if the man is, in fact, the president of the college.

But none of this is relevant for the present argument. I have not argued that if one can perceive that  $X$  is  $F$  and the property of being  $F$  is identical (or reducible to) the property of being  $G$ , then one can perceive that  $X$  is  $G$ . Instead, I have argued that if one can perceive that  $X$  is  $F$  and the property of being  $F$  is identical (or reducible to) the property of being  $G$ , then the property of being  $G$  is

just as causally responsible for the relevant perceptual experience as is the property of being *F*. My claim is merely that *if* moral properties are natural ones, *then* there is no principled reason for saying that putative cases of moral perception fail to meet the causal condition. Of course moral perception requires much more than meeting the causal condition, but the present argument is designed only to demonstrate that putative cases of moral perception meet this latter condition.

However, my thesis is open to an objection from a different angle. Suppose that moral wrongness is the property of having a feature that would make an act prohibited according to a contract that people would agree to in the original position. In this case moral properties would be natural properties, but there is no plausible story about how such strange properties as these could causally impact our perceptual faculties.<sup>72</sup> The result is that the possibility of moral perception depends on the nature of moral properties—on some views of moral naturalism, moral properties would meet the causal constraint whereas on others they would not. Thus the possibility of moral perception turns on a substantive issue in metaethics.

This is a serious objection, but two things may be said in response. First, at the very least I have shown that moral properties are able to interact causally with our perceptual faculties on some versions of moral naturalism, and that is a worthwhile achievement. In other words, I have shown that it is not in principle impossible for humans to meet the causal condition on perception if moral properties turn out to be non-secondary natural properties. However, if the

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<sup>72</sup> Thanks to Brian Kierland and Matt McGrath for pressing similar versions of this objection.

present objection is sound, then my overall thesis will be severely undercut: I will have shown that moral perception occurs *only if* it turns out that moral properties are of a certain sort, and since perceptual moral knowledge requires moral perception, the tenability of my overall thesis hangs on whether or not moral properties turn out to be that sort or not.

Second, at best the causal condition requires that in order to perceive that *X* is *F* I be in causal contact with some *portion* of *X* or the *F*-ness of *X*. For example, I meet the causal condition when I look at my computer despite the fact that I am not in causal contact with the underside of it. When I perceive that the animal is a cat, I meet the causal condition in virtue of being in causal contact with certain features of the animal in virtue of which it is a cat (e.g. its shape).

Similarly, if moral properties were non-secondary natural properties, and if I can be in causal contact with at least some of the properties that are tightly connected to or constitutive of the moral properties, then this is sufficient for being in causal contact with the moral properties themselves. For example, suppose the fact that people would choose to prohibit a certain action is due (at least in part) to the fact that the action causes pain. In this case, there is a tight connection between the property of *causing pain* and the property *being morally wrong* (via the subjunctive conditional about what rational people in the original position would prohibit). While this tight connection isn't enough to show that being caused by one property is sufficient for being caused by the other, perhaps it's enough to meet a weakened version of the causal constraint (as entertained below).

What this shows is that the objection needs to be refined in order to undercut my robust claim that moral perception is possible no matter what moral properties turn out to be like. Since I think that it's plausible that the causal condition is met in cases in which we're in casual contact with a subset of constitutive properties, *and* I can't imagine a plausible moral ontology on which moral properties are not closely connected by the kinds of properties that we can come into causal contact with (e.g. causing pain), I conclude that the possibility of moral perception won't hinge on how the debate over moral ontology is decided.

### **3.2.3 Moral Properties as Non-Natural Properties**

Following G.E. Moore (1903), many philosophers have been unhappy with the view that moral properties are natural properties. In specific, Moore argued (1) that the defense of any particular species of moral naturalism commits the naturalistic fallacy and (2) that any particular species of moral naturalism was vulnerable to the open question argument.<sup>73</sup> Is moral perception possible if moral facts turn out to be non-natural facts? On the face of it, this seems implausible. Michael Ridge (2003) entertains the possibility that we can perceive non-natural moral properties only to dismiss it: "If non-natural properties are by definition causally inert then this position seems problematic," (§3). Can putative

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<sup>73</sup> It is contentious whether there even is such a thing as the naturalistic fallacy and if so, what it amounts to. For present purposes it is sufficient to note that the naturalistic fallacy is roughly the fallacy of drawing an evaluative conclusion from non-evaluative premises. Moore claimed that moral naturalists who invoked natural facts to support their view had committed the naturalistic fallacy. The open question argument purports to show that moral predicates are not definable in natural terms. The argument is roughly as follows: for any natural property N, it is an open question whether or not a moral property like 'good' is identical with N, thus moral terms like good are not semantically equivalent with any natural term.

cases of moral perception meet the causal constraint on perception even if moral facts are neither identical with nor reducible to natural properties?

I think that the answer to this question is yes, though I grant that the case for the perception of non-natural properties is difficult to make out. I shall employ two different strategies in arguing for this conclusion. On the first strategy, I assume that we can perceive other non-natural properties, and I argue that the causal contribution of non-natural moral properties is analogous. On the second strategy, I argue that the causal condition ought to be interpreted in a way that allows for perception of non-natural properties that supervene on natural ones.

Consider the first strategy. The final paradigm instance of perception from §3.1 is as follows: I perceive that my mother is angry. An argument for the possibility of moral properties meeting the causal constraint might go as follows. Mental properties are causally impotent, non-natural properties (i.e. epiphenomenalism about mental states is true). These mental properties are neither identical with nor reducible to any natural properties. And yet we can perceive that someone is in pain or that someone is angry. Similarly, even if it turns out that moral properties are epiphenomenal, non-natural properties, it is in principle possible to perceive that a given moral property is instantiated.

The limitation to this argument is obvious: it assumes the truth of a controversial view about the nature of mental properties, *viz.* that they are epiphenomenal.<sup>74</sup> While I am sympathetic to the view, my case for moral

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<sup>74</sup>However, it's strange that the following argument has not been levied against epiphenomenalism by its opponents:

1. It is possible to perceive that someone is in pain.

perception would be weak if I relied on this assumption. Perhaps there are other instances of perception that would serve to motivate the argument from analogy here, but if there are, I am not aware of them. What is needed is a *non-controversial* example of perception *de dicto* of the instantiation of a non-natural property. The examples that come to my mind are at least as controversial as the analogs in a case of moral perception (e.g. perceiving that the painting is beautiful where the aesthetic property in question is non-natural).

A second strategy is much more promising. The second strategy requires understanding the motivation behind the causal condition and altering it to allow for the perception of a property that is not causally efficacious. Why is a causal connection between the observer and the property required? To answer this, it is helpful to get clear on the historical motivations behind the restriction. Recall that the causal condition was adopted in order to solve puzzling cases like Grice's pillar case. Here is another case from D.F. Pears (1976):

*P* is a traveller [sic] in a desert, and he hallucinates an oasis with his eyes closed, so there can be no doubt that [his visual experience] is not caused by anything beyond his eyelids. However, there is a real oasis, *O* in front of him and [his visual experience] matches *O* perfectly feature by feature. But *P* cannot be seeing *O* because, though the match is perfect, it is entirely coincidental. (p. 25)

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2. It is possible to perceive that someone is in pain only if the pain causes our perceptual experience.
  3. So, it is possible for pain to cause a perceptual experience.
  4. If epiphenomenalism were true, then it is not possible for pain to cause anything.
  5. So, epiphenomenalism is false.

Why, according to Pears, is this not a case of perception? Because it is simply a coincidence that *P*'s perceptual experience matches the external world. Pears severs the causal link between the two in order to get a case of coincidence. Similarly, Strawson (1974) explicitly defends the causal condition by appeal to matters of coincidence:

The concept of perception is too closely linked to that of knowledge for us to tolerate the idea of someone's being in this way merely flukishly right in taking his [visual experience as if M] to be the [perception of M] that it seems to be. Only those [visual experiences as if M] which are in a certain sense dependable are to count as the [perceptions of M] they seem to be; and dependability in this sense entails dependence, causal or non-logical dependence on appropriate M-facts. (p. 71)

Here again, Strawson notes that what really motivates the causal constraint is the fact that the concept of perception is non-accidental in the same sort of way that the concept of knowledge is non-accidental. Just as you cannot know that *P* accidentally or by a fluke, you cannot perceive that *P* if your perceptual experience is produced accidentally or by a fluke.

So the defense of the causal condition is an appeal to non-accidentality. The connection between the facts in the world and the experiences in our heads can't be accidental in a case of perception. Perception needs to be reliable. Strawson goes on to claim that "dependability in this sense" entails causal dependence. But this is too fast. Requiring a causal connection between the fact and the perceptual experience is one way to eliminate accidentality, but it is not the only way. A causal connection is *sufficient* to ensure non-accidentality, but it is not *necessary*. Another option—one that is just as dependable—is to



require a causal connection between a fact on which another property supervenes and the perceptual experience.

One property supervenes on another if and only if no two states of affairs can differ with respect to the first without also differing with respect to the second. In other words, change in the first property entails a change in the second property. Now suppose that A-properties supervene on B-properties, and B-properties can cause visual experiences. This allows for the kind of non-accidental perceptual experiences that Grice, Pears, and Strawson require. It is no accident that I have a perceptual experience as if an A-property is instantiated when I am in causal contact with B-properties since anytime the B-properties are instantiated, the A-properties are likewise instantiated.

David Lewis (1980) makes a related suggestion in his seminal piece on prosthetic vision. He attempts to sort a variety of bizarre scenarios into cases of genuine and specious perception and notes that the causal condition is an unhelpful way of making the distinction. Instead, he thinks that whether or not someone with, say, a prosthetic eye, can perceive depends on a counterfactual condition:

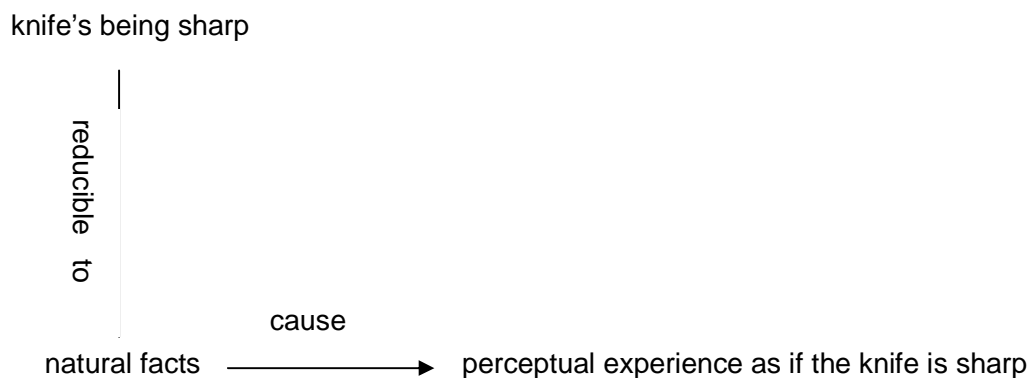
This is my proposal: if the scene before the eyes causes matching visual experience as part of a suitable pattern of counterfactual dependence, then the subject sees; if the scene before the eyes causes matching visual experience without a suitable pattern of counterfactual dependence, then the subject does not see. (p. 142)

Lewis' suggestion is similar to mine in that the rationale behind the requirement of counterfactual dependence is the elimination of accidentality. When the

counterfactual dependence requirement is met, it is no coincidence that the visual experience matches the external facts.

The non-accidentality can be seen in another way. Note that the reliance on supervenience in the case of non-natural properties is isomorphic to the reliance on reducibility in the case of higher-order, natural properties. In the one case it is supervenience that “connects” the causally efficacious property with the supervening property, and in the other case it is reducibility that “connects” the causally efficacious property with the higher-order property. This is not to say that supervenience and reducibility are alike in all respects; after all, a supervenience relation between two entities simply indicates a modal correlation between the two whereas a reducibility relation indicates a stronger relation such as identity.<sup>75</sup> However, in both cases there is a reliable connection between the facts (higher-order or non-natural) and the perceptual experiences, and it is the similarity in reliability that is crucial for my analogy. Consider the following schemas:

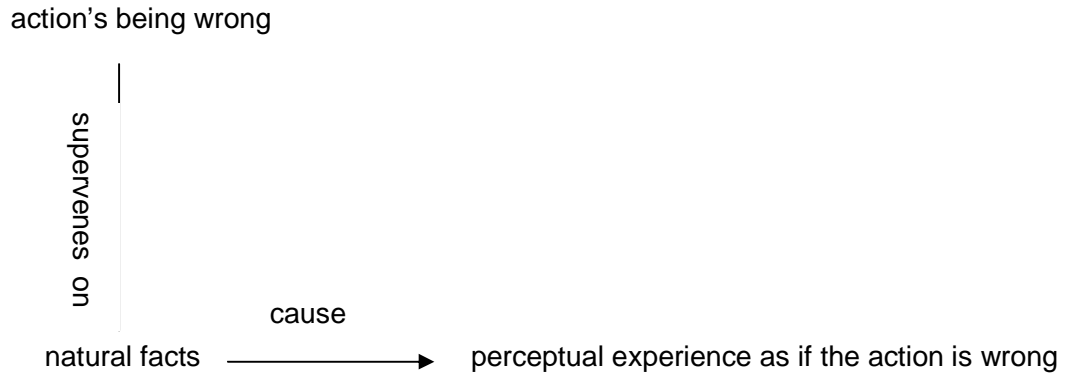
**Schema for higher-order, natural properties:**



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<sup>75</sup> Thanks to Brian Kierland for pointing the relevant differences between supervenience and reduction.

### Schema for supervenient, non-natural properties:



My suggestion is that the causal condition be understood in a way that allows for the perception of properties that supervene on natural ones.<sup>76</sup> This emendation is not *ad hoc* since the point of the causal condition is to eliminate accidentality, and the emended condition meets this requirement as well. Furthermore this understanding of the causal condition is consistent with the ordinary way in which we conceive of perception. Strawson (1979) points out that “we think of perception as a way...of informing ourselves about the world of independently existing things...” (p. 51), and the emended causal condition allows for that. Indeed Dummett (1979) thinks that perception is possible even if an occasionalist metaphysics turns out to be true:

...if someone believes, with Malebranche, that the presence of the object and my perception of it are joint effects of some further cause, his belief does not violate the concept of perception, so long

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<sup>76</sup> I do not know whether the defenders of the paradigm analyses of perception that I invoked at the opening of this chapter would agree with this emendation. Perhaps they understand the causal condition in a more strict manner. If so, I am breaking from tradition here. However, I think that (A) the tradition bears out my reading of the causal constraint and (B) the defenders of the paradigm analyses *should* understand the causal condition in this manner.

as he allows that my perception supplies a reason for taking the object to be there. (p. 35-6)

Even on an occasionalist metaphysics there can be a regularity between perceptual experiences and the appropriate facts as a result of a causal connection between one's perceptual faculties and external world properties, and this is what is required by our concept of perception. Whether my experience as if *P* is caused by the fact that *P* or by the fact that *Q* on which the fact that *P* supervenes, in either case perception is a reliable source of information about the world.<sup>77</sup>

My case for the claim that putative examples of moral perception meet the causal condition is now easy to make out. Even if moral properties turn out to be non-natural properties, it is widely conceded that the non-natural moral properties supervene on natural properties. In other words, there can be no two worlds that are identical with regard to natural facts but differ with regard to their respective moral facts. And if (A) we can be in causal contact with the base-level natural facts and (B) supervenience of moral facts on these base-level facts is sufficient to meet the causal condition on perception, then putative cases of moral perception can meet the causal condition on perception.

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Markie suggests the following case: Suppose that God exists and has designed humans such that anytime they have a perceptual experience as if there is an oasis present, there is, in fact, an oasis present. In such a case, is it true to say that the person is perceiving the oasis? I think the answer is yes. In this case, the person has a perceptual experience as if an oasis is present, an oasis is present, and the link between the actual oasis and the experience of one is non-accidental: God has designed humans to be accurate oasis detectors in this way.

## Chapter 4: The Epistemology of Moral Perception

We should give no less credit to the unproved remarks and opinions of those who are practically wise, or old and experienced, than we give to [their] proved views. For since they have the eye that experience gives them, they see right.

~Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1143b14

### 4.0 Introduction

I have argued that moral perception is possible, and—granting contingent claims about the sorts of experiences that people actually have—that it actually occurs. However, my overall thesis is that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual knowledge. In order to establish this claim, I need to show that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge. That is the goal of this final chapter.

A moment's reflection shows that perceiving that  $X$  is  $F$  is not always sufficient for knowing that  $X$  is  $F$ . For example, perhaps you perceive that  $X$  is  $F$  though you fail to believe that  $X$  is  $F$ , and since knowledge requires belief, you thereby fail to know that  $X$  is  $F$ . However, even perception with belief is not always sufficient for knowledge. Consider Goldman's (1976) famous barn case:

Henry is driving in the countryside with his son. For the boy's edification Henry identifies various objects on the landscape as they come into view. "That's a cow," says Henry. "That's a tractor," "That's a silo," "That's a barn," etc. Henry has no doubt about the identity of these objects; in particular, he has no doubt that the last-mentioned object is a barn, which indeed it is....Suppose we are told that, unknown to Henry, the district he has just entered is full of papier-mâché facsimiles of barns. These facsimiles look from the road exactly like barns, but are really just facades....Given this new

information, we would be strongly inclined to withdraw the claim that Henry *knows* the object is a barn. (pp. 772-3)

In this case, Henry has a perceptual experience as if *that* is a barn, that object is, in fact, a barn, and his perceptual experience is appropriately caused by the barn. In other words, Henry perceives that *that's* a barn.<sup>78</sup> However, as Goldman points out, Henry does not know that *that's* a barn.<sup>79</sup> This is because he is in a Gettier scenario that makes his true belief sufficiently accidental so that it falls short of the standards for knowledge.

The most straightforward way to demonstrate moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge is to take an accepted model of perceptual knowledge and simply show that moral perception meets the necessary and sufficient conditions of the account. Unfortunately, while most philosophers agree *that* perception is a source of knowledge, they disagree widely about *how* perception is relevant to knowledge. I propose the following strategy. In order to show that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge, I shall apply 4 contemporary accounts of perceptual knowledge to my results from chapters 2 and 3. I shall argue that no matter which of these accounts turns out to be correct, the prospect of perceptual moral knowledge is secure.

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<sup>78</sup> Matt McGrath suggests that while Henry perceives a barn in this case, he doesn't perceive that *that's* a barn. I don't share this intuition since I think it would be perfectly normal for Henry to continue to think that he saw that the object was a barn even after he comes to find out that he was in fake barn country. At any rate, the issue is whether or not perceiving-as is sufficient for knowledge. I think not. If one disagrees with this, so much the better for my overall case—since I showed that it was possible to see something as bearing a moral quality, then if perceiving-as is sufficient for knowledge, then I've already met my burden of showing that it is possible to have perceptual moral knowledge.

<sup>79</sup> It is widely acknowledged in the contemporary literature that Gettier conditions undermine knowledge, and I operate within that assumption here. If it turns out that Gettier conditions are consistent with knowledge (as a few contemporary philosophers are wont to argue), this won't affect my overall thesis. In fact, that would just remove one more obstacle to perceptual moral knowledge.

The chapter is divided as follows. In §4.1 I show that independent of whether moral perception is ever sufficient for moral knowledge, it is at least sometimes sufficient for justified moral belief. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to evaluating the epistemic efficacy of moral perception on 4 contemporary accounts of perceptual knowledge:

§4.2 Indirect Realism (e.g. Bonjour)

§4.3 Direct Realism (e.g. Dretske)

§4.4 Evidentialism (e.g. Steup)

§4.5 Proper Functionalism (e.g. Plantinga)

I close the chapter in §4.6 where I briefly recount the objection from moral disagreement as a potential defeater for perceptual moral knowledge, and I argue that this objection fails.

#### **4.1 Justified Belief and Moral Perception**

Before turning to the issue of whether moral perception is ever sufficient for moral knowledge, it is important to ask whether or not moral perception is ever sufficient for justified moral belief. While it's true that accounts of epistemic justification vary just as much as accounts of knowledge, moral perception is sufficient for justified moral belief on several plausible accounts of justification. In fact, mere moral perceptual experiences (as opposed to moral perception) are sufficient for justified moral belief in at least some cases. This conclusion is motivated in part by thought experiments like Stewart Cohen's (1984) new evil-demon problem:

Imagine that unbeknownst to us, our cognitive processes (e.g. perception, memory, inference) are not reliable owing to the

machinations of the malevolent demon. It follows on a Reliabilist view [and other factive views of justification] that the beliefs generated by those processes are *never* justified. Is this a tenable result? I maintain that it is not...on the demon hypothesis, we would have every reason for holding our beliefs, that we have in the actual world....If we have every reason to believe e.g. perception, is a reliable process, the mere fact that unbeknownst to us it is not reliable should not affect its justification-conferring status... (pp. 281-2)

Are the subjects in the demon world justified in their beliefs concerning the external world? If so, what is it that justifies their beliefs? The answer cannot be perception: *ex hypothesi*, the demon worlders never perceive anything. The only plausible candidate for justifiers are the demon worlders' mere perceptual experiences.<sup>80</sup> A particular demon worlder is justified in his belief that a cup is in front of him because he has a certain kind of perceptual experience. And if mere perceptual experiences have the epistemic authority to justify external world beliefs in the new evil demon case, mere moral perceptual experiences have the epistemic authority to justify moral beliefs in the actual world.<sup>81</sup>

Again, precisely *how* the perceptual experience functions to provide justification for a specific belief is an open question. The important point at present is that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for the justification of moral beliefs. To argue for this claim, I shall apply two prominent

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<sup>80</sup> One might argue that it is the coherence among the demon worlders' beliefs that justify any given belief about the external world. But even in this case the perceptual experiences play a crucial justificatory role since it is plausible that only wide reflective equilibrium that takes the nature of one's perceptual experiences into account will be a candidate for a justifier.

<sup>81</sup> One might object that there is a crucial difference between the demon worlder's situation vis-à-vis external world perception and our situation vis-à-vis moral perception. For example, in Cohen's case, the demon worlders "have every reason to believe perception is a reliable process" whereas we lack a reason to think that moral perception is a reliable process. Note two things. First, a belief that perception is a reliable process is neither necessary nor sufficient for justification on Cohen's view as sketched here. Second, there is no principled reason why I may not come to hold the belief that moral perception is reliable—all that is necessary is that I form the belief that I have been accurate in discerning moral qualities in the past. I briefly address issues of reliability further in §4.4.



accounts of justification to Harman's putative case of moral perception. First, consider the general account of epistemic justification defended by Michael Huemer (2001). Huemer's account relies on the epistemic power of what we might call "seeming states," and thus he grounds the epistemic potency of a perceptual experience in the fact that having a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  makes it seem to us that  $X$  is  $F$ . From there, the epistemic heavy lifting is accomplished by what he calls the principle of phenomenal conservatism:

(PC) If it seems to  $S$  as if  $P$ , then  $S$  thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that  $P$ . (p. 99)

Since a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  makes it seem to the subject as if  $X$  is  $F$ , a perceptual experience is capable of generating *prima facie* justification for the belief that  $X$  is  $F$ . And in a case of moral perceptual experience, it seems to the subject in question as if a particular moral property is instantiated. And thus the subject's belief that a particular moral property is instantiated is *prima facie* justified for him. Finally, since mere *perceptual experiences* are capable of rendering moral beliefs justified, then *a fortiori* moral *perception* is so capable.

Huemer's account of epistemic justification is perfectly general as opposed to an account of perceptual justification, *per se*. However, consider an account of perceptual justification defended by John Pollock (2005). Pollock endorses a form of direct realism in which perceptual beliefs are justified in virtue of the fact that they are perceptual beliefs. Pollock endorses the following direct realist principle:

(DR) For appropriate  $P$ 's, if  $S$  believes [that]  $P$  on the basis of being appeared to as if  $P$ ,  $S$  is defeasibly justified in doing so.

Unlike Huemer's phenomenal conservatism in which any kind of seeming state is sufficient to justify a belief, Pollock (A) restricts the scope of "seeming" or "appearing" to cover only literal phenomenal (non-metaphorical) seemings and (B) qualifies the entire scope of the principle to range only over *appropriate* propositions:

Appropriate *P*s are simply those that can either result from a direct encoding or for which the cognizer can learn a *P*-detector. We will thus understand direct realism as embracing both direct encoding and visual detection. (p. 338)

On Pollock's account, if a belief is formed as a result of either direct encoding or by the subject's learned *P*-detector, then the belief is defeasibly justified. I shall explain both processes in turn. In the first case, a visual belief, for example, is the result of the subject's apprehending information that is directly encoded in the visual image. Pollock calls this phenomenon 'directly seeing-that'. Directly seeing-that is limited to properties that are representable in the visual field.<sup>82</sup> Call these properties 'perceptible properties'. Among perceptible properties, Pollock lists convexity, concavity, spatial relation, etc. (p. 323). On Pollock's view perceptual experiences represent very little.

Obviously if directly seeing-that is the only source of perceptual justification, most of our perceptual beliefs would be unjustified on Pollock's account. This is because the range of perceptible properties is so narrow. In order to show how perceptual beliefs like 'there is a computer in front of me' are justified, Pollock needs more. This is accomplished with the introduction of the

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<sup>82</sup> Pollock focuses his account on visual perception, but I imagine that he would endorse a similar view for the other sense modalities. Perhaps a few properties can be represented in an auditory experience, for example, and the remainder of the auditory information that we receive is the result of a learned connection.

second source of perceptual beliefs: beliefs that result from a learned *P*-detector. Pollock calls this phenomenon ‘recognizing-that’. Pollock suggests that humans have cognitive modules called “*P*-detectors” that are sensitive to data presented in the visual image. For example, a computer-detector “fires” when certain data are present in my visual field producing the belief ‘there is a computer.’ This connection is both epistemic and causal—there is no inference from what I *seem* to see to what is there. Instead, a perceptual module yields the thought ‘there is a computer’ when my visual field is in a certain state.<sup>83</sup>

Both directly seeing-that and recognizing-that are direct in the sense that both are processes that start with input from the visual field and end with thoughts without any intervening inferences, etc. The difference between them is twofold. First, directly seeing-that produces beliefs with content that is already encoded in the visual field while in a case of recognizing-that, “the visual system merely provides the evidence on the basis of which we come to ascribe a property that we think about in some other way” (p. 322). Second, the capability to directly see-that is hardwired into our perceptual systems while at least many of the capabilities for recognizing-that are learned (p. 336). The conclusion is that on Pollock’s view an agent can have a justified perceptual belief “by directly encoding some of the contents of the image into thoughts” (i.e. directly seeing-that) or “by acquiring visual detectors through learning and using them to

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<sup>83</sup> I use the term ‘thought’ here purposefully as Pollock, Lyons, and others writing about perception make a distinction between a thought and a belief where the latter is a thought that is endorsed by the subject. For example, upon having a snake-like experience, I might have the thought ‘there’s a snake’ even though I do not believe this because I know that I am experiencing a drug-induced hallucination.

attribute non-perceptible properties to the things we see” (i.e. recognizing-that, pp. 336-337).

If Pollock’s view of perceptual justification is correct, is it possible to have perceptual justification of moral beliefs? Well, on his view it is *not* possible to directly see that  $X$  is  $F$  whenever  $F$  is a moral property. Experiences only represent low-level properties like spatial arrangement and convexity. They never represent higher-level properties like moral properties. However, recognizing-that is capable of justifying a much broader range of perceptual beliefs. Recognizing-that is a process that occurs when the visual field triggers a  $P$ -detector, and Pollock suggests that it is likely that  $P$ -detectors are learned. For example, after having my visual field in state  $\Phi$  many times and coming to believe that a cat was present in each case, my perceptual system creates a cat-detector that forms the belief ‘there’s a cat’ in response to input  $\Phi$ .

Couldn’t this occur for moral beliefs? Even if it is implausible that such moral  $P$ -detectors are innate, visual recognition can be a learned process on Pollock’s account, and there is no *principled* reason to restrict the range of possible  $P$ -detectors to mere physical objects.<sup>84</sup> For example, after seeing someone punch another on several occasions and coming to believe that what he did was wrong in each case, my perceptual system might create a

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<sup>84</sup> And why should it be implausible that such  $P$ -detectors are innate? In fact, on some views it might not be all that surprising if humans were hard-wired to have  $P$ -detectors for moral qualities. For example, if something like standard theism is true, it would not at all be odd if God designed us with the capacity to form justified beliefs about moral and spiritual matters on the basis of perception. After all, the God of standard theism loves humans and wants them to enjoy fulfilling lives filled with the purpose that results from what is often termed “morally significant” freedom and exercising such freedom requires moral knowledge.

wrongness-detector that forms the belief 'that's wrong' when my perceptual field is in a similar state.

One might respond as follows.<sup>85</sup> For a moral belief to be justified by a perceptual experience, one must have developed a *P*-detector that correlates a particular perceptual input with a moral content. Doing so requires that one have a justified moral belief *before* acquiring the *P*-detector. For example, it appears that having a justified belief that punching others is wrong is a pre-condition for one to form a *P*-detector that would correlate perceptual input with the content '*that's wrong*'.

There are a number of things that can be said in response to this objection. First is an exegetical point: The belief that is associated with the perceptual input need not be initially justified on Pollock's account. All that need happen is that the subject learn to associate some given perceptual data with some given propositional information. One might think, "so much the worse for Pollock's account," but my concern at present is to demonstrate that a prominent account of perceptual justification allows for the justification of moral beliefs by perception.

Second, even if we emend Pollock's account to require a justified moral belief before the learning process can take place, this does not seem to present a principled difficulty for moral perception. For example, one might gain the justified belief that punching others is wrong in any number of ways (e.g. testimony). Think of the child who is told by his mother that what Timmy did on the playground was wrong.

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<sup>85</sup> Thanks to Peter Markie for raising this objection.

However, my extrapolation of Pollock is open to a more serious objection. Since there does not seem to be a principled limitation to the connection between experiences and content that a subject might learn, it seems that Pollock's view allows for any number of crazy beliefs to be justified by perception. For example, if Roy learns to connect the perceptual experience he has when he sees a sunset with the proposition "there goes Rex the wonder horse," then on Pollock's view he can come to have a justified belief about Rex. And if so, then it's no surprise that we can extend his account to cover moral perception. The worry is best expressed as a dilemma: either the Rex belief is epistemically deficient or not. If so, then one wonders whether or not moral beliefs formed on the basis of perception suffer the same defect. If not, then Pollock's view is too liberal—surely Roy's belief about Rex the wonder horse is not as epistemically secure as his belief 'there is a cup on the table.'<sup>86</sup>

Two things may be said in response to this worry. On the first horn of the dilemma, even if one grants that there is something amiss with Roy's belief about Rex the Wonder Horse, this is not enough to show that the belief is not justified for him. There are a variety of epistemic merits that a belief may have. For example, a belief might be reliably-produced, virtue-produced, ungettiered, safe, sensitive, justified, rational, etc. So even if we conclude that moral beliefs share the same epistemic deficiency that the Rex the Wonder Horse belief exhibits, this is insufficient to show that the moral belief is not justified, and that is the point of

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<sup>86</sup> This objection is from Peter Markie, though he did not raise it in the form of a dilemma as I do here.

the present argument. And on at least some accounts of justification—including Pollock's—the Rex the Wonder Horse belief *is* justified for Roy.

On the second horn of the dilemma, we may allow that there are a variety of ways for a belief to be epistemically deficient and concede that the Rex belief is deficient in an important way. Intuitively the epistemic deficiency of Roy's belief about Rex the Wonder Horse is due to the fact that the color of the sky is not indicative of the presence of Rex the wonder horse. The two are merely associated in Roy's mind by a coincidence. In other words, Roy's belief forming practice lacks an important external characteristic: the practice is not reliable. While his mental correlation might be sufficient for some weak sort of epistemic merit, surely our everyday perceptual beliefs are justified for us in a way that Roy's wonder horse belief is not.

But on this horn of the dilemma, it's not obvious that the moral beliefs formed in putative cases of moral perception are more like Roy's belief than they are like our everyday perceptual beliefs. The comparison turns on whether or not the belief-forming practice that gives rise to the moral beliefs is sufficiently reliable. In both cases there are learned associations between perceptual experiences and propositional content. But in the Roy case, this epistemic practice is unreliable (i.e. it does not produce mostly true beliefs for the simple reason that Rex the Wonder horse doesn't regularly appear with the sunset). In the moral case, it is at least possible that the learned association gives rise to an epistemic practice that is reliable. Suppose, for instance, that a subject comes to associate the perceptual experience of boys lighting a cat on fire with the

proposition '*that's wrong*'. In this case, the epistemic practice of forming the belief '*that's wrong*' in the face of such perceptual experiences is quite reliable. This is because in relevant nearby worlds in which persons douse a living animal with gasoline and light it on fire, the action is morally wrong. Thus, even if Pollock's account is too weak to demarcate an epistemic difference between the Rex belief in Roy's case and the moral belief in the Harman case, this is not enough to show that the epistemic prize is off limits in the moral case.<sup>87</sup>

I conclude that moral perception is sufficient in at least some cases for justified moral belief. While justification is importantly weaker than knowledge, this conclusion is still a noteworthy one. For example, it is justification and not knowledge that is often relevant to whether or not a subject has met his epistemic obligations or is epistemically praiseworthy or blameworthy for holding a belief. It is plausible (though contentious) that justified belief and not knowledge is the norm for assertion: it is proper to assert that *P* if and only if I have a justified belief that *P*; that it is justified belief and not knowledge that matters for meeting the epistemic requirements for being morally responsible for some action or outcome; and that it is justified belief and not knowledge that plays a key role in determining whether or not a subject acts rationally in certain scenarios.

#### **4.2 Indirect Realism and Moral Perception**

There are many different accounts of how perception generates knowledge. One of the oldest is known as indirect realism or representationalism. The view has

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<sup>87</sup> I take up this general issue in more detail in the afterward where I confront the potential limits on moral perception.



its roots in Locke and Russell and has been recently defended by Laurence Bonjour (1999, 2003, 2004). Indirect realism includes both a metaphysical thesis and an epistemological one. The metaphysical claim is that in perception we are only immediately aware of mind-dependent entities called sense-data. On this view, we are not immediately aware of external objects. Instead, we perceive external objects by being aware of sense data.<sup>88</sup> The epistemological claim of indirect realism is that knowledge of the external world requires an inference—usually from beliefs about our sense data (or our perceptual experiences more generally) to beliefs about the external world.<sup>89</sup>

In this section I shall briefly recount Laurence Bonjour's (2003) indirect realist account of perceptual knowledge and then show how moral perception is capable of generating moral knowledge given his account.<sup>90</sup> Bonjour's account of perceptual knowledge is foundational in that it posits a set of basic beliefs. He defines 'basic belief' as follows:

...a foundational or "basic" belief is supposed to be an empirical belief that (a) is adequately justified in the epistemic sense, but (b) whose epistemic justification does not depend on inference from further empirical beliefs that would in turn have to be somehow justified. (1999 p. 230)

On Bonjour's view, the only basic empirical beliefs that we have are those about our sensory appearances, i.e. beliefs about how things seem to us in experience.

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<sup>88</sup> I shall use the term 'sense data' in the discussion that follows to refer to the mind-dependent entities that indirect realists posit as the only objects of immediate awareness in perception, and I flag here that I am not endorsing the view that such entities actually exist. My own view is a direct realist view: in perception we are immediately aware of external world objects.

<sup>89</sup> Note that the two theses are logically independent. For example, one might be an indirect realist in the metaphysical sense but a direct realist in the epistemic sense.

<sup>90</sup> Note that Bonjour often uses 'knowledge' and 'justification' interchangeably, but since he argues that we can have empirical knowledge on the basis described here, it seems fair to ascribe a view of knowledge in which knowing that P amounts to having properly justified (i.e. ungettiered) true belief that P.

Simplified a bit, we might say that on this view we have basic knowledge concerning our sense data but no basic knowledge concerning the external world. Perceiving that  $X$  is  $F$  is sufficient for knowledge concerning the existence and character of related sense data.<sup>91</sup> However, perceiving that  $X$  is  $F$  is not yet sufficient for external world knowledge.

However, Bonjour is not a skeptic. He thinks that we can come to have knowledge of the external world, and this knowledge is the result of an inference:

...the specific characteristics of our sense-data, and especially their spatial characteristics, are such as to be easily and naturally explainable by supposing that they are systematically caused by a relatively definite world of mostly solid objects arranged in three-dimensional space, and by no other hypothesis that is not...essentially parasitic on that one. (2003 p. 88)

According to Bonjour, we can come to know things about the external world via an abductive inference from the existence and character of our sense data to the existence and character of external world objects and states of affairs. The best explanation for the existence and character of our sense data is what Bonjour calls the quasi-commonsense hypothesis:

[There is] a realm of three-dimensional objects, (1) having at least approximately the shapes corresponding to those reflected in the "nuclear" sense-data, (2) through which I move in such a way as to change my point of view, (3) which are spatially related to each other in the ways reflected in the sequences produced by my apparent movement, and (4) which have causal properties and change over time in the ways corresponding to the relevant further aspects of the experiential patterns. (2003 p. 92)

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<sup>91</sup> This is not to suggest that on Bonjour's view we actually *perceive* sense data. On his view, we are *immediately aware* of sense data. This immediate awareness is a source of basic knowledge about the existence and nature of our sense data, but it is not a source of basic knowledge about the external world.

Perception provides us with basic knowledge of the existence and character of our sense data. The quasi-commonsense hypothesis is the best explanation of these facts. Therefore, the quasi-commonsense hypothesis is true. And thus we have knowledge of the external world.

There is much to complain about in this picture of empirical knowledge. First, if Bonjour is correct, then very few of us know anything about the external world. This is because (A) most of us don't have beliefs about our sense data and (B) even if we did, none of us actually perform inferences from how things seem to us to how things really are. However, intuitively many of us know things about the external world. So, Bonjour's account is mistaken. Second, it's not clear that the particular abductive inference that Bonjour suggests is a good one. Bonjour's argument for the claim that the quasi-commonsense hypothesis is the best explanation of the data is sketchy at best.<sup>92</sup> Third, as we'll see below, Bonjour's account rules out certain instances of empirical knowledge as a matter of principle (e.g. knowledge about color), and this is a problem because intuitively we know that, for example, the sky is blue. The line between empirical facts that can be known and those that cannot relies on the role those facts play in the abductive inference: If a fact doesn't figure in to the best explanation of our sense data, then it is not the kind of fact that we can come to know perceptually.

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<sup>92</sup> Bonjour has an argument for this claim that relies on a distinction between analog explanations (those that posit analogs for each of our sense data) and digital explanations (those that do not posit analogs for each of our sense data). The quasi-commonsense hypothesis is an analog explanation. Descartes' evil demon or Berkley's God are digital explanations. Bonjour argues that all analog explanations are better than digital ones in terms of simplicity and that the quasi-commonsense hypothesis is the best of the analog explanations. I leave open whether or not this argument ultimately works.

However, since the indirect realist approach to perceptual knowledge has a long history in Western philosophy, it's important to be clear about the implications for perceptual moral knowledge if indirect realism is correct. In other words, if we grant that Bonjour's account is accurate, is moral perception ever sufficient for moral knowledge? The answer to this question turns on whether or not moral facts would ever play an essential role in the best explanation of our sense data. As noted above, this conclusion can be generalized for any putative fact, and Bonjour admits that this is a shortcoming of his view:

At best this explanatory argument justifies attributing to physical objects only those features that are clearly required to explain the character of our experience. As already noted, these features will arguably include spatial, temporal, and causal properties. But it is pretty clear that they will not include secondary qualities like color...(2003 p. 96)

The implication is that moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge if and only if moral facts play essential roles in the best explanation of both the existence and character of our sense data.

Let's take the issue of explaining the existence of our sense data first. There are deep issues underlying any discussion of the explanatory power of values more generally (and moral properties in particular). For instance, Harman (1977, 1986), Blackburn (1991), and others have argued that moral facts don't explain anything. Others (e.g. Zangwill 2006) allow that moral facts might explain certain non-doxastic data, but that it is illicit to appeal to a moral fact to explain a belief. Others, notably Sturgeon (1985, 1986, 1988, 1991, 2006), argue that moral facts can explain a wide range of phenomena including at least some of

our moral beliefs. The kinds of cases that Sturgeon has in mind include the following:

- Hitler's moral depravity helps to explain why we believe that he was morally depraved.
- Midshipman Woodworth, the commander of the rescue operation sent after the Donner Party, was a selfish coward, and thus the mission failed because he was no damned good.
- A judge's fairness and decency explains why he refuses to impose the maximum sentence on a certain offender.
- We can explain why opposition to slavery arose in certain areas of the world instead of others (despite the fact that slavery was practiced worldwide) by noting that the practice of slavery was worse in those areas than in others. (1985 pp. 54-64)

One central question in resolving the matter of the explanatory role of moral facts was covered in chapter 3, *viz.* the ontology of moral facts. If moral facts are natural facts or are reducible to natural facts, then there seems to be no principled problem with invoking moral facts to explain one's sensory experiences. The more troubling case is one in which moral properties are non-natural properties that supervene on natural ones. Suppose that A-properties supervene on B-properties, and the B-properties figure in to the best explanation of some further data. An explanation of this data that invokes the A-properties is an A-explanation, and an explanation that invokes the B-properties to explain the data is a B-explanation. Indirect realist views now face the following dilemma: either A-explanations can play a role in the best explanation for the existence of our sense data or they cannot. Suppose that they can. If so, then there is no principled objection to moral properties playing a role in the best explanation of

the relevant data, and thus in at least some cases perception together with the standard abductive inference is sufficient for moral knowledge. Suppose on the other hand that A-explanations cannot figure into the best explanation of the existence and character of our sense data. Then the indirect realist has to give up any putative empirical knowledge of supervening properties including secondary properties like being colored. And if we can't come to know that the sky is blue by looking at it, then indirect realism is very implausible indeed.

Gilbert Harman (1977) anticipates this sort of worry when he requires that facts that are candidates for perceptual knowledge play explanatory roles in perceptual experiences, and he thinks that color facts are exonerated in the following way:

Even if we come to be able to explain color perception by appeal to the physical characteristics of surfaces, the properties of light, and the neurophysiological psychology of observers, we will still *sometimes* refer to the actual colors of objects in explaining color perception, if only for the sake of simplicity. For example, we will explain that something looks green because it is yellow and the light is blue. It may be that the reference to the actual color of the object in an explanation of this sort can be replaced with talk about the physical characteristics of the surface. But that would greatly complicate what is a simply and easily understood explanation. (22)

Harman's strategy is to loosen the requirements of explanation so that a strict causal connection is not required. Though the color of an object, per se, does not cause my perceptual experience, it may still play a role in the best explanation for my perceptual experience because of two things: (A) the color of the object is tightly connected to the underlying physical facts that do cause the experience and (B) it is convenient (i.e. more simple) to advert to color facts in explaining a perceptual experience. The response from a defender of moral

perception is by now obvious: moral facts are tightly connected to the underlying physical facts that cause our perceptual experiences and—in at least some cases—it is more convenient (i.e. more simple) to advert to moral facts in explaining a perceptual experience. Why did Harman's subject have the perceptual experience that he did? Because he was faced with an instance of gratuitous cruelty.

Recall that on Bonjour's account, a fact must not simply explain the existence of sense data that we have, but it must also figure into an explanation of the *character* of the sense data. I think that it is plausible that moral facts can help to explain this as well, although the explanatory route is circuitous. The argument for this conclusion has three steps. Step one: moral facts often play a role in the best explanation of non-doxastic facts. Take one of Sturgeon's classic examples: the fact that Hitler was morally depraved plays a role in the best explanation for the atrocities he orchestrated.<sup>93</sup> Step two: these non-doxastic

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<sup>93</sup> Matt McGrath has raised the following worry. While it is perhaps plausible to think that there might be explanatory statements that are both true and contain reference to moral facts, this is not sufficient to show that these are the best explanations for the relevant data. In other words, there is more work to be done in order to demonstrate that moral facts would actually figure in the *best* explanation for a given set of data. Peter Markie has made a similar objection to the Hitler example: Once we analyze moral depravity, we'll find that it has a non-moral component, for example a disposition to engage in certain sorts of behaviors, and it is that non-moral component (and not some corresponding moral property) that does the explanatory work.

This worry is a serious one, and I am not sure how to meet the challenge. For one thing, it's not clear to me what conditions an explanation must meet to be the best one. Using Harman's criteria in the preceding paragraph, it seems that Hitler's depravity *will* figure into the best explanation. At any rate, I note here that this unresolved issue is a problem for the current account—if it can be demonstrated that moral facts will never figure into the *best* explanation for any non-moral data, then perceptual knowledge of moral facts is impossible on the assumption of indirect realism. Note however, that it's not just *perceptual* moral knowledge that has trouble with Harman's principle. If his claim is that my observation that *P* (e.g. it seeming to me that *P*) is evidence for *P* only if the truth of *P* figures into the best explanation of my observation that *P*, AND if moral facts never play a role in the best explanation for non-moral facts (e.g. facts about what we observe or what seems true to us), then we will have no

facts often play a role in the best explanation for moral beliefs. For example, the fact that Hitler orchestrated the atrocities of the Holocaust plays a role in the best explanation for my belief that he was morally depraved (e.g. I wouldn't have believed he was morally depraved had he not done so). Step three: moral beliefs often play a role in the best explanation for the character of our perceptual experiences.

My defense of step 3 in the argument took place in chapter 2 where we saw that background conditions like beliefs often affect the character of a perceptual experience (or, in indirect realist terms, the character of one's sense data). Albert's perceptual experience as if his mother is serving ham is relevantly different in its phenomenal character after he gains the background belief that it is wrong to eat meat. The character of the phenomenal experience is different as a result of one's moral belief, and so the moral belief will play a role in explaining why the phenomenal experience is *this* way rather than *that* way.<sup>94</sup> So, granting that moral facts can sometimes figure in to the explanations for our moral beliefs, it follows that moral facts can at least sometimes partially explain the character of one's sense data. To escape the force of the argument, one must oppose one or more of the three steps noted above. But explaining why people do what they do by appeal to moral terms seems perfectly appropriate (e.g. he didn't help his

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evidence for moral claims whatsoever. And if knowledge requires evidence, then we will have no moral knowledge whatsoever.

<sup>94</sup> Brian Kierland has suggested that maybe Bonjour would want to preclude such circuitous explanations in favor of more direct explanations for the character of our perceptual experiences (or, as Bonjour would put it, the character of our sense data). I don't know whether this is so, but—as I noted in chapter 2—it seems that we often rely on psychological facts to explain the character of our perceptual experiences. Why does the wine taste better when it's labeled with a higher price? The best explanation will appeal to my unique psychological set, and if we can explain why I have the psychological set that I do, this latter fact seems a relevant part of the explanation for why the wine tasted better.



sister because he's a lazy ass), and what people do (or fail to do) often plays a role in explaining the moral beliefs that we have about them. And if I'm right about background beliefs affecting phenomenology, then it looks like moral facts can play a role in the best explanation for the character of our sense data.

I don't claim to have given a complete account of moral explanation. That is outside of the scope of the present project. However, I hope to have done enough to show that if we accept indirect realism as an account of perceptual knowledge, we cannot avoid one of the following results: we either construe the explanatory requirement so stringently that facts like color facts fail the test OR relax the requirement enough so that both color facts and moral facts can play roles in the best explanations of our sense data. Once it is obvious that we cannot avoid this conclusion, non-skeptics are left with the conclusion that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge on Bonjour's indirect realism.

### **4.3 Direct Realism and Moral Perception**

In contrast with indirect realism, direct realism holds both that in perception we are immediately aware of the commonsense objects of the external world and that knowledge of the external world does not rely on an inference from seeming states. In the remainder of this chapter I consider several versions of direct realism. In this section I recount the direct realist view of Fred Dretske (1969) as

defended in his seminal work *Seeing and Knowing*,<sup>95</sup> and I show that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on his account.

While Dretske focuses on seeing as opposed to other sense modalities, his account can be applied to other forms of perception, *mutatis mutandis*, and thus it forms a nice touchstone for an inquiry into the possibility of moral perceptual knowledge. Seeing often results in knowing, and the condition under which this occurs Dretske calls 'primary epistemic seeing'.<sup>96</sup> Dretske analyzes primary epistemic seeing as follows:

S sees that *b* is *P* in a primary epistemic way only if:

- (i) *b* is *P*
- (ii) S sees<sub>n</sub> *b*
- (iii) the conditions under which S sees<sub>n</sub> *b* are such that *b* would not look, L, the way it now looks to S unless it was *P*
- (iv) S, believing the conditions are described in (iii), takes *b* to be *P*.

Conditions (i)-(iv) are severally necessary and jointly sufficient for a case of seeing to count as primary epistemic seeing.<sup>97</sup> Before explaining the conditions in more detail, it is important to note that primary epistemic seeing is sufficient for perceptual knowledge (p. 124). Concerning the analysis itself, Dretske writes that:

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<sup>95</sup> Though Dretske 1969 does not use the term 'direct realism', he argues that there are no good reasons to suppose that, "...when we see a coffee pot, this visual achievement is mediated by our direct awareness of something other than a coffee pot" (p. 75).

<sup>96</sup> This is compared with secondary epistemic seeing which relies on primary epistemic seeing. The difference is that in primary epistemic seeing, one sees that *b* is *P* by seeing<sub>n</sub> *b* while in secondary epistemic seeing, one sees that *b* is *P* by seeing in the primary sense that *c* is *Q* (where *b* ≠ *c*). See pp. 153-168.

<sup>97</sup> The analysis can be found on pages 78-88. Dretske (1969) claims that the conditions are jointly sufficient on p. 88.

The schemata for *primary* epistemic seeing are descriptions of a particular class of situations, a class in which the 'seeing that' locution functions in such a way as to answer the question 'How does S know that *b* is *P*?' (p. 142).

In a case of primary epistemic seeing, the way *b* looks to S provides him with a conclusive reason to believe that *b* is *P* (p. 121). So in order to demonstrate that at least some cases of moral perception are sufficient for moral knowledge on Dretske's account, it must be shown that at least some cases of moral perception are cases of primary epistemic seeing.

Condition (i) is simply the factive restraint on perception. I cannot see that the bush is green unless it's true that the bush is green. Condition (ii) requires that the subject stand in a particular visual relation to the object of perception. Dretske refers to this relation as 'seeing<sub>n</sub>', where the subscript 'n' indicates a non-epistemic way of seeing (p. 30). Seeing<sub>n</sub> is a visual accomplishment that is devoid of positive belief content—when I see<sub>n</sub> *b* this does not entail that I have any beliefs at all, much less beliefs about *b*.<sup>98</sup> This is the sort of accomplishment that infants, non-human animals, and adult humans have in common. Dretske argues that this condition is met anytime a subject visually differentiates an object from its immediate environment (p. 20). If a brown piece of paper is attached to a brown wall so that I cannot differentiate the paper from the wall, I am unable to see<sub>n</sub> the paper. However, if two people in a crowd are wearing different color jackets, then (providing I am close enough and looking in the right direction) I can see<sub>n</sub> both people. Differentiation is a result of objects looking some way or other to the subject (where this sense of 'look' does not entail

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<sup>98</sup> 'S sees *X*' has positive belief content iff it entails that S has a particular belief. 'S sees *X*' has negative belief content iff it entails that S does *not* have a particular belief (Dretske 1969 p. 5).

belief). So a subject  $S$  sees<sub>n</sub>  $b$  iff the way  $b$  looks allows  $S$  to visually differentiate it from the surrounding environment.<sup>99</sup>

However, seeing<sub>n</sub> is not sufficient for knowledge. Recall that seeing<sub>n</sub> is devoid of positive belief content, and thus seeing<sub>n</sub> does not entail that the subject in question believe anything, much less know anything. And while what we know as a result of perception varies widely among adult humans, what we see<sub>n</sub> varies only with our location and the acuity of our vision:

However much we may differ from one another in what we can see *to be the case* in relation to these [publically observable] objects and events, almost all of us are similarly endowed to see (see<sub>n</sub>) the objects and events themselves. (p. 77)

Condition (iii) does most of the epistemic work in the analysis. In order for  $S$  to see in the primary epistemic sense that  $b$  is  $P$ , the background conditions under which the seeing<sub>n</sub> occurs must be such that  $b$  would not look the way it does to  $S$  unless it were  $P$ .  $b$ 's looking a certain way must, in these particular circumstances, actually be indicative of its being  $P$ . This is an empirical generalization and not a logical claim (p. 83). It might be logically possible for  $b$  to look this way and yet not be  $P$ . All (iii) requires is that normally when  $b$  looks this way, it is  $P$ . Notice that the condition does not require that *only*  $P$ -things look this way. I can see in the primary epistemic sense that  $b$  is a zebra despite the fact that a cleverly-disguised mule would have the very same look.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Seeing<sub>n</sub> usually, but not always, has a causal implication. Normally, if  $S$  sees<sub>n</sub>  $b$ , then  $S$  is in the general vicinity of  $b$  and is looking in the appropriate direction. (Dretske 1969 p. 50, see footnote for exceptions to the causal rule). Also, the objects of seeing<sub>n</sub> are subject to substitution of identicals without loss of truth in the relevant descriptions. If  $S$  sees<sub>n</sub>  $b$ , and  $b=c$ , then  $S$  sees<sub>n</sub>  $c$ . (Dretske 1969 p. 54)

<sup>100</sup> Peter Markie has complained that the Dretske's condition (iii) is ambiguous between a *de re* reading on which it is trivial and a *de dicto* reading on which the principle is substantive but contentious. I think that Dretske's condition should be read as a *de dicto* requirement on the

Condition (iv) is a belief requirement. In order for a subject *S* to see in the primary epistemic way that *b* is *P*, he must believe that background conditions are as specified in condition (iii) and he must believe that *b* is *P*.<sup>101</sup> To stave off objections that this requirement over-intellectualizes the process, Dretske claims that the beliefs concerning background conditions need only be dispositional (p. 118). For example, upon being questioned about whether or not the way *b* looks is indicative of whether or not it is *P*, the subject must be inclined to think that the answer is yes. And this condition is not meant to require an inference either. The subject simply comes to believe that *b* is *P* on the basis of the way *b* looks to him when he sees<sub>n</sub> *b*.

Is moral perception ever sufficient for moral knowledge on Dretske's account? In order to answer this question, we must determine whether or not it is possible for a subject to see in the primary epistemic sense that something bears a moral property. And indeed this is possible. Condition (i) in the analysis is met as long as there are moral properties (and recall that I am assuming moral realism), and condition (ii) is met as long as it is conceded that we can have visual contact with at least some of the kinds of things that bear moral properties: states of affairs, events, actions, people, etc. Anyone who is a non-skeptic about perceptual knowledge should be happy to grant that we see people, actions, etc. As for Dretske, he argues that it is indeed possible to see<sub>n</sub> states of affairs,

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perceptual environment. Sure, zebras normally look like zebras, but what's at issue here is whether the environmental conditions are such that this particular zebra would look like one if it were one given the state of the environment under which the seeing<sub>n</sub> occurs.

<sup>101</sup> "*B* is a background condition if and only if (a) *B* is logically and causally independent of the (non-relational) features and properties of *b* itself (and, in particular, of *b*'s being *P*), and (b) there are variations in *B* which affect the way *b* looks to *S*." (p. 82)

events, actions, people, etc. And (iv) is equally obviously met in a putative case of moral perception: it is possible that someone could be disposed to believe that something's looking a certain way was indicative of it bearing a moral property and that someone could come believe that it indeed had this property as a result of his perceptual experience.

Condition (iii) initially looks like the problem for putative cases of moral perception. (iii) requires that the conditions under which  $S$  sees<sub>n</sub>  $b$  are such that  $b$  would not look the way it now looks to  $S$  unless it was  $P$ . Recall Harman's example with the torture of the cat: would the situation have looked the very same to the subject if the action had not been wrong? Since (iii) is a subjunctive conditional, it is helpful to translate the requirement into talk of possible worlds. Go to the nearest world in which the background conditions are the same and yet the boys' action is not morally wrong. In that world, would the action still look the same to the subject?

The answer is no. The background conditions must be held constant between these worlds, and that includes any native dispositions, learning experiences, beliefs, learned associations, etc. that the subject brings with him, and Dretske insists that what a subject believes can affect what he can see in the primary epistemic sense. He calls this information 'proto-knowledge' and defines it as follows:

...that totality of information which  $S$  possesses about the identity or character of the  $b$  (which he sees to be  $P$ ) at the time he sees that  $b$  is  $P$  minus only that increment in information whose manner of acquisition is described by saying that  $S$  can see that the  $b$  is  $P$ .  
(p. 96)

For example, in order to see that the water is boiling, one must have the proto-knowledge that it is water in the pot (as opposed to vodka or something else). The result is that differences in proto-knowledge can lead to differences in primary epistemic seeing:

...*what we see*, in an *epistemic* way, can be influenced by all those variables that are capable of influencing what we believe. If one's past experience, one's conceptual categories, modes of classification, and habits of association, have any influence on what one believes or what one can, in a given situation, come to believe, then they thereby have a commensurate influence on *what one can see* in the epistemic way of seeing. (p. 76)

With the concept of proto-knowledge in hand, consider again the subjunctive condition in condition (iii). Holding past experience, conceptual categories, modes of classification, habits of association, etc. constant, what would the action in Harman's case look like if the action had not been wrong? Sturgeon (1985) suggests the following:

...since what makes [the boys'] action wrong, what its wrongness *consists* in, is presumably something like its being an act of gratuitous cruelty, to imagine them not doing something wrong we are going to have to imagine their action different in this respect. (p. 66).

So in order to evaluate the truth of the subjunctive conditional in condition (iii), we must go to the closest world in which the boys are not engaged in an act of gratuitous cruelty. This means that the natural facts that the moral facts are either reducible to or supervene on will have to change as well. Suppose in that world they are petting the cat or burning a toy cat or something of the like. Would this action still have looked the same to the subject in Harman's case? No. Boys petting a cat looks very different from boys burning a cat. Thus, at least some of

the putative cases of moral perception meet condition (iii). And if at least some cases of moral perception are cases of primary epistemic seeing, then, since primary epistemic seeing is, *ex hypothesi*, sufficient for perceptual knowledge, in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for perceptual moral knowledge.

There are two initially plausible lines of objection to my argument in this section, the first focused on the satisfaction of condition (iii) and the second on the satisfaction of condition (iv). Concerning (iii), it is *logically* possible that the action is morally permissible despite the fact that the scene appears the same to the subject. For example, go to the world in which the cat is a cat zombie or a mechanical cat. In that case, the action would look the very same (even holding background conditions constant) and yet the action would be morally right. This objection misunderstands the strength of condition (iii). Condition (iii) does not require that it be a logical necessity that the character of the perceptual experience is indicative of the property (p. 83). The subjunctive conditional is true if and only if the action looks the same in the *closest* possible world, not in all possible worlds.<sup>102</sup> So this objection fails.

The objection can be revised in the following way. Even if we allow that it's only the nearest possible world that is relevant for the satisfaction of (iii), why think that this subjunctive requirement is met in the Harman case? Cashing out

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<sup>102</sup> Dretske (1969) considers a similar objection to his claim that we can see (in the primary epistemic sense) emotional states, e.g. that your wife is moody:

...to see that your wife is moody, on a given occasion, is *not* to imply that whenever she is moody you can see it; it is *not* to imply that whenever anyone is moody you can see it; it is *not* to imply that whenever your wife looks *this* way she is moody or *whenever* she is moody she looks this way. What is implied is that under these (background) conditions (not just any conditions) your wife (not just anyone) would not look this way unless she was moody. (p. 186)



the “nearness” relation in a slightly different way yields the result that the action would have looked the very same to the subject despite the fact that it was not wrong. For suppose that the nearest possible world in which the boys’ action was not wrong is the world in which they are forced to burn the cat to save the lives of a hundred innocent persons? (Imagine that a certain cat terrorist has captured 100 people and threatened to execute them if someone doesn’t burn a cat alive with gasoline. In this world, it would be morally permissible to burn the cat.) If this is really the closest possible world, then condition (iii) is not met, and thus Harman’s case is not a candidate for seeing a moral fact in the primary epistemic sense.

This way of pushing the objection raises an interesting suggestion concerning the limits of moral perception that I shall take up in the afterward. Perhaps perceptual knowledge requires sensitivity, where *X* is sensitive to *Y* if and only if were *Y* different, *X* would be different.<sup>103</sup> For example, my belief that the milk is not soured is sensitive to this fact just in case in the closest world in which the milk is soured I don’t believe that it’s good.<sup>104</sup> In this sense, Dretske’s condition (iii) is a sensitivity requirement on perception. For present purposes, it is enough to concede this constraint on perceptual knowledge and argue for a nearness relation that shows that condition (iii) is met in at least some putative cases of moral perception. While it is always tricky to argue for modal claims, it seems that a world in which a terrorist takes 100 people hostage and demands

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<sup>103</sup> Sensitivity constraints on knowledge have been defended by Nozick (1981) and others.

<sup>104</sup> The contrapositive of the sensitivity condition is a safety condition. My belief that the milk is good is safe just in case in the closest world in which I believe the milk is good, it really is good. Notice, however, that the sensitivity condition and the safety condition are logically independent as contraposition is not valid for subjunctive conditionals.

the burning of a cat is much further from the world of Harman's subject than the world in which the boys simply opt to leave the cat alone and do something else (e.g. burn a stack of garbage) instead. The latter requires us to posit fewer entities and changes, and is thus more simple. It is also much more likely given the background information that we know about the way the world is. This is not to dismiss the objection wholesale—it might indeed show that we can't get moral knowledge by perception in certain cases (again, I shall handle this matter in the afterward). But it is not powerful enough to show that we can *never* obtain moral knowledge by perception, and it is that thesis that I mean to refute here.<sup>105</sup>

The second objection targets the satisfaction of condition (iv). Recall that (iv) requires that the subject in question be disposed to believe that conditions are as specified in condition (iii), that is, he must be disposed to believe that the look of the action is a reliable indicator of the wrongness of the action. But what if this belief is the result of wishful thinking or a brainwashed upbringing? If the subject's belief concerning the background conditions is not justified, then he cannot come to know that the boys' action is wrong by seeing it.

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<sup>105</sup> Brian Kierland suggests yet another way of re-vamping the objection. Suppose that the counterfactual is read in such a way that it requires all of the facts that cause the perceptual experience to remain static while the moral facts differ. Under this reading, condition (iii) is met if and only if the action would not look the same to the subject in the world in which all the non-moral facts are held constant and yet the action is morally permissible.

Suppose that Kierland's suggestion is the proper way to read condition (iii). In that case the subjunctive conditional is trivially met in the Harman case. This is because—granting the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral—there is no possible world in which the non-moral facts and the moral facts “come apart” in the way required by the new reading. If it were to be the case that all of the non-moral facts remain static while the moral facts change, then the scene would have looked different to the subject. It is also true that if it were to be the case that all of the non-moral facts remain static while the moral facts change, then the scene would have looked *the same* to the subject. Both claims are true because each contains a necessarily false antecedent, and thus on standard counterfactual semantics, both are trivially true.

This objection commits an exegetical mistake. Notice that condition (iv) says nothing about the justification of the subject's belief concerning the background conditions. Indeed, Dretske is emphatic that the belief need not be justified for the experience to count as a case of primary epistemic seeing:

...what makes a background belief effecting in allowing us to see what is the case is not its justification, or how (antecedently) justified we are in having it, but the fact that it is a belief and the fact that it is true...What I am suggesting is that the degree of justification which the percipient has for his background beliefs is quite irrelevant to the effective operation of these beliefs in transforming S's seeing beige walls into S's seeing that the walls are beige. (pp. 135-6)

And so the objection is misplaced: (iv) can be met even in the absence of justification for a subject's background beliefs. Primary epistemic seeing simply does not require justification of this sort. The attraction to this kind of objection, according to Dretske, is not that justification is necessary for perceptual knowledge but that it is necessary for a kind of immunity from perceptual skepticism: "Justification of one's background beliefs lends *durability* to the knowledge which one achieves by visual means (and, thereby, relative immunity from skeptical questioning), but it is not a necessary ingredient to that knowledge itself," (p. 138).

"Very well," the objector may concede, "putative cases of moral perception count as primary epistemic seeing on Dretske's account. But so much the worse for his account. The fact that the background belief need not be justified simply shows that primary epistemic seeing is not sufficient for perceptual knowledge after all." Two things can be said in response to this renewed complaint. First, the goal of this section is simply to show that moral perception is sufficient for

perceptual moral knowledge on a major contemporary account of perceptual knowledge. The thesis is that IF Dretske's account is correct, THEN moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge. This thesis survives the present objection. Second, even if it were true that Dretske's account needs to be modified to require justified background beliefs, this does not create an insurmountable hurdle for moral perception. Dretske himself notes that satisfying conditions (i)-(iv) automatically provides a subject with some level of justification for the crucial background belief:

[A subject] is able to justify [his background belief], not in the sense that he has actually performed any antecedent tests or checks in confirmation of it, but in the sense that any subsequent tests on his accuracy in telling whether *b* is *P* (on visual grounds alone) will automatically confirm the background belief which he originally manifested in supposing himself to be able to see that *b* was *P*.  
(p.135)

Some might object to this move as an instance of the easy knowledge problem and insist that such self-checking cannot generate justification. However, even if so, there is no principled reason for thinking that a subject could not get justification in some other way (e.g. testimony, inductive reasoning, etc.). I conclude, then, that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on Dretske's view of perceptual knowledge.

#### **4.4 Evidentialism and Moral Perception**

A number of philosophers argue that the epistemic relevance of perception comes by way of evidence. Perceiving that *P* is a source of knowledge that *P* because perceiving that *P* (or perhaps having a perceptual experience as if *P*) is evidence for *P*. This view differs from indirect realism in that indirect realism

allows only that perceiving (or perceptual experiences) provides evidence for claims about the existence and nature of sense data whereas a direct realist, evidentialist view of perception allows that perceiving (or perceptual experiences) provides evidence for claims about the external world. Depending on the particular account, evidentialism will differ from Dretske's account by placing more stringent restrictions on what counts as perceptual evidence.

However, it should be noted that the major evidentialist views about perception in the contemporary literature focus on epistemic justification rather than knowledge. In order to arrive at an evidentialist account of perceptual knowledge, I shall conjoin an evidentialist view of perceptual justification with a defeasibility view of knowledge on which knowledge is undefeated, properly justified (i.e. ungettiered), true belief. As a paradigm case of evidentialism about perceptual knowledge, I shall consider the view of Matthias Steup (1996) and suggest ways of amending Steup's account to make it more plausible. I shall conclude this section by noting that in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge on Steup's evidentialist account.

Steup opens his discussion of perceptual justification by noting the importance that perception plays in foundationalist accounts of justification. An account of epistemic justification is foundational just in case it holds that (a) there are at least some beliefs that do not depend on other beliefs for their justification (i.e. there are at least some *basic* beliefs) and (b) all other justified beliefs depend on inferences from these basic beliefs. Perception plays a crucial role in foundationalist accounts of justification because, as Steup points out,

...basic beliefs function as regress terminators. In order to perform this function, they must be justified without receiving their justification from other beliefs. One way in which beliefs can thus be justified is through perceptual experience. (p. 101)

But what are the conditions under which perception is a source of basic beliefs? Steup develops his account of perceptual justification on the assumption that having a perceptual experience as if  $X$  is  $F$  is not sufficient for perceptual justification. For example, if he were appeared to as if a dodecagon were in front of him, this would not justify his belief that a dodecagon were in front of him. Steup explains this fact by claiming that he knows that he is not reliable in recognizing dodecagons.<sup>106</sup> After some Chisholming, he settles on the following analysis for a basic perceptual belief:

...my belief 'there is an  $F$  before me' is basic if the following three conditions are satisfied:

- (i) I am appeared to  $F$ -ly;
- (ii) there are no other beliefs of mine justifying my belief 'there is an  $F$  before me';
- (iii) I have good evidence for taking myself to be reliable in discerning  $F$ -things. (103-4)<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> I think it's more plausible that his knowledge about his unreliability functions as a defeater for justification rather than a precondition for justification. It seems more accurate to say that being appeared to as if  $X$  is  $F$  IS sufficient for *prima facie* justification for the claim that  $X$  is  $F$ , but that this *prima facie* justification is defeated in Steup's case by his belief (or knowledge) about his unreliability. The crucial issue is whether being appeared to as if  $X$  is  $F$  requires the subject to have what some philosophers have called a phenomenal concept of  $X$  and of  $F$ . Consider again the herpetologist case in which a herpetologist and a novice come upon a copperhead. Is it true that the novice is appeared to as if the snake is a copperhead? In one sense of the phrase, he is not, and it is on this sense that I think being appeared to as if  $X$  is  $F$  is sufficient for *prima facie* justification that  $X$  is  $F$ . Of course, if you think that the novice is appeared to as if the snake is a copperhead, then you should agree with Steup that being appeared to as if  $X$  is  $F$  is insufficient for *prima facie* justification that  $X$  is  $F$ .

<sup>107</sup> I note here that Steup states the conditions as jointly sufficient, but context indicates that he must also think them severally necessary (he just rejected the view that condition (i) is sufficient, so he must think that there are other conditions that are necessary). Also, Steup presents this as an analysis of a basic belief, but context again shows that he thinks that

The important addendum for present purposes is condition (iii). Steup claims that what matters for justification is "...not that I *am* reliable in discerning *F*-things, but rather that I *have good evidence* for believing myself to be reliable in discerning *F*-things" (p. 103). He calls this the presumptive reliability condition. Combining this account of perceptual justification with a defeasibility account of knowledge, and we have an evidentialist analysis of perceptual knowledge.

How does moral perception fare on this view? In chapter 2 I argued that condition (i) can be met for at least some moral properties, and condition (ii) can be stipulated for putative cases of moral perception. The important question is whether or not condition (iii) is ever met in a putative case of moral perception. Can someone have good evidence that they are reliable in discerning moral properties? Unsurprisingly, I think the answer is yes. Below I provide four different ways of reading 'good evidence', and I show either that the reading is too strong to provide us with basic perceptual beliefs or that it is possible to have good evidence of reliability for at least some moral properties in at least some cases.

First, consider an intuitive account of what good evidence for reliability in a non-moral case would look like. I have good evidence that I am reliable in discerning at least some emotional properties. For example, I have good evidence that I am reliable in discerning when my wife is angry. What is my good evidence in this case? Simply this: I have been accurate in the past in determining whether or not she was angry by the way that she looked. Similarly,

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perceptual beliefs are basic, and so this account will also show when a perceptual belief is justified.

it is possible that a subject hold the following belief: I have been accurate in the past in determining whether or not an action was morally wrong by the way that it looked. Note that this is NOT to say that the subject's belief is true—that would be to require *de facto* reliability (similarly, this is not to say that the subject remembers that he has been accurate in the past where 'to remember' is factive). All we need postulate is that the subject believe that when things looked a certain way in the past, that things were as he suspected. When things looked wrong to him and he checked it out further, it turns out that they were really wrong.<sup>108</sup> In cases like the Harman case, this doesn't seem implausible.

But even if I am wrong about the Harman case, the present account of good evidence—though plausible as a first pass—won't be acceptable to Steup (or at least it *shouldn't* be). This is because good evidence in this case amounts to a belief. But if the justification of the perceptual belief depends on my having some further belief, then the perceptual belief is not basic.<sup>109</sup> This is a troubling result for someone like Steup who wants to defend a foundationalist view of

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<sup>108</sup> This reading of evidence might be strengthened further to require that the subject have a justified belief that he is reliable in discerning moral facts. Again, there is no principled reason for thinking that this higher burden cannot be met: the subject might have "easy knowledge" as in the Dretske case mentioned above, he might have testimony concerning his reliability, he may have made an inductive inference about past occasions, etc. Matt McGrath wonders about cases in which the reliability belief is positively irrational for the subject. Would it still count as evidence for the subject's reliability? I think it depends on how we cash out irrationality. If by 'irrational' we mean that the belief is defeated for the subject so that it is no longer justified for him, then I think that irrational beliefs do not constitute evidence. However, as just noted, there is no reason to think that beliefs about one's moral reliability need to be defeated in this way—one might have a memory-like experience, testimony, etc. to substantiate the reliability belief and thus render it rational.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Markie suggests that maybe Steup could loosen his account to allow for dispositional beliefs about our reliability. I don't have a counterexample to this view, but even if plausible, I don't think that it affects the central point of the passage as long as we allow that it's possible for humans to have dispositional beliefs about the reliability of their moral perception.



justification. If it turns out that even perceptual beliefs depend on other beliefs for justification, it is hard to see how any belief will be basic.

Second, we might understand 'good evidence' as not merely a belief about past identifications but as an instance of knowledge. In his own example, Steup considers whether or not someone has good evidence for believing that he is reliable in discerning kiwi fruit: "Well, if you know what a kiwi looks like, then your evidence would be a piece of self-knowledge: your knowing that you know what a kiwi looks like" (104). On this reading, 'good evidence' amounts to meta-knowledge. I have good evidence that something is an *F* just in case I know that I know what *F*-things look like. On the face of it, this is much too strong. For myself, I can say that I rarely form beliefs about my own knowledge of how things look. I may know what a kiwi looks like, but I hardly ever form beliefs about this knowledge. For example, I may form the belief that I know what a kiwi looks like if you challenge my identification in the grocery store, but other than that, I simply fail to hold that particular belief about my knowledge. In other words, when I look at a kiwi on the table, I come to know that there is a kiwi on the table without relying on any other beliefs about what I know.

Third, we might loosen Steup's requirement of meta-knowledge to require only that one know what *F*-things look like (instead of requiring that one know that one know what...). This seems a much more plausible restriction. In the case of the kiwi, an appearance of a kiwi would justify a perceptual belief about the kiwi only if one knew what kiwis looked like. Here again we find trouble for Steup's foundationalism. If a perceptual belief is justified only if one knows a

certain proposition, then it seems that the justification of the perceptual belief is dependent upon some further belief. If so, perceptual beliefs are not basic. And if perceptual beliefs are not basic, it will be *very* difficult to account for the fact that many of our external world beliefs are justified.

Steup might complain that this is not the sort of dependency that's at issue in the analysis of a basic belief. When we define a basic belief as one that does not depend on some other belief for its justification, this dependency relation is meant to rule out cases like that of inferring one belief from some other set of beliefs. In a case of inference, it's clear that the justification of the inferred belief depends on the subject's having some further beliefs. But how is Steup's presumptive reliability condition any different? The justification of the perceptual belief is certainly dependent *in some sense* on the subject's having other beliefs. For example, the following material conditional is entailed by Steup's account: my belief that my computer is on is justified for me only if I believe that I am reliable at detecting when my computer is on.<sup>110</sup> And if the belief about my reliability is not contributing in some way—at the least as an enabling condition—towards the justification of the perceptual belief, then it's hard to see why it is required for justification.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Peter Markie has pointed out that the same sort of dependency also holds for other beliefs that are clearly unrelated to the justificatory status of the perceptual belief. For example, my belief that a computer is on is justified only if I believe that I exist.

<sup>111</sup> Suppose you find this entire line of argument too fast. Does that mean that there is no possibility of perceptual moral knowledge on this reading of Steup's account? No. Suppose that perceptual knowledge about *F*s requires that one know what *F*-things look like. How can we interpret this condition in order to ensure that I can come to know that my wife is angry by looking at her? Certainly we don't want to require that I know what all angry people look like. It's better to require the following: I know that when things look like this, then my wife is angry. But on this construal, moral knowledge by perception doesn't look so far-fetched. I suggest

Fourth, and finally, in a footnote Steup explains why he thinks that he is reliable in discerning the color red:

Well, there is something like a common framework of reference involving red objects--e.g. tomatoes, Coke cans, Ferraris. My own identifications of red objects cohere with this framework. What other people identify as red, I identify as red, and vice versa. This provides me with a good reason for taking myself to be a reliable discerner of redness. (pp. 112-3)

This final account of 'good evidence' seems to allow for basic perceptual beliefs.<sup>112</sup> My good evidence that I am reliable in discerning kiwis is not a belief that I have but the fact that there is a common framework of reference regarding kiwis where this framework amounts to a coherence between what I identify as a kiwi and what others identify as a kiwi. As long as the identifications of those around me cohere in the right way with my own identifications, then I have evidence that I am reliable in discerning, say, kiwis. On this reading of 'good evidence' it is rather obvious that a subject can have good evidence that he is reliable at discerning, say, morally wrong actions. Take Harman's case. The subject looks at the boys and forms the belief "that's wrong." He turns to his companion and asks whether or not he thinks that what the boys did was wrong. His companion agrees. Enough instances like this (in both directions) would give the subject in Harman's case good evidence that he is reliable in discerning moral wrongness. And so it seems that all three of Steup's conditions can be met in at least some putative cases of moral perception. Given an evidentialist

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that anyone reading this dissertation knows the following: when things look as they do to the subject in Harman's case, the boys are doing something wrong.

<sup>112</sup> It won't however, be internalist justification since the good evidence amounts to a "framework of reference" where this seems to include externalist elements.

framework for perceptual knowledge, and moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge.

#### **4.5 Proper Functionalism and Moral Perception**

Some contemporary accounts of perceptual knowledge appeal not only to factors that are internally accessible to the putative knower but also to factors that are “external” to her in the sense that these facts are not accessible to her upon reflection. Two of the most prominent externalist accounts of perceptual knowledge are reliabilism and proper functionalism. Reliabilist analyses come in two forms, process reliabilism and virtue reliabilism. According to process reliabilism (roughly), a perceptual belief that *P* amounts to defeasible knowledge that *P* when that perceptual belief was reliably formed. William Alston has sketched a process reliabilist account of perceptual knowledge in *Perceiving God* (1991), and he argues that religious perception is sufficient for religious knowledge on that model. Since I think that his account can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to putative cases of moral perception to show that moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge, I shall not treat process reliabilism further here.

According to virtue reliabilism (roughly), a perceptual belief that *P* amounts to defeasible knowledge that *P* when the subject in question exercised an intellectual virtue in the production of the belief that *P*. John Greco has sketched a virtue reliabilist account of perceptual knowledge in *Putting Sceptics in Their Place* (2000), and he has explicitly extended this account to show that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for moral knowledge.<sup>113</sup> For this reason, I shall not treat virtue reliabilism further here. However, there is not an

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<sup>113</sup> See the first half of chapter 9 for the relevant details.

explicit defense of the possibility of moral knowledge by perception on the assumption that proper functionalism is the correct account of perceptual knowledge, so in this section I shall sketch a plausible contemporary account of proper functionalism and show that—given the truth of proper functionalism—in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge.

The most popular proper functionalist account of knowledge is due to Alvin Plantinga (1993), and it is his version of the view that I shall entertain here.<sup>114</sup> Plantinga focuses his analysis on the concept of warrant, “this elusive quality or quantity enough of which, together with truth and belief, is sufficient for knowledge” (p. v). Since it is obvious that moral perception is sufficient for moral belief (even Harman grants this), and since an independent argument for moral realism is outside of the scope of this work, I shall assume that the truth and belief conditions are met in putative cases of moral perception. The question, then, is whether or not moral perception is ever sufficient for warrant in Plantinga’s sense. I shall sketch Plantinga’s analysis of warrant and then show that the necessary and sufficient conditions for warrant are met in at least some putative cases of moral perception.

Plantinga offers the following analysis of warrant:

...we may say that a belief *B* has warrant for *S* if and only if the relevant segments (the segments involved in the production of *B*)

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<sup>114</sup> Another contemporary proper functionalist account that is worth exploring is that of Michael Bergmann’s as detailed in *Justification Without Awareness* (2006). Bergmann focuses his effort at defending a proper functionalist account of justification rather than knowledge, and for that reason, I set his view aside here. Still, since I think that Bergmann’s account shows that moral perception is at least sometimes sufficient for propositional justification, I reproduce his account here:

S’s belief *B* is justified iff (i) *S* does not take *B* to be defeated and (ii) the cognitive faculties producing *B* are (a) functioning properly, (b) truth-aimed and (c) reliable in the environments for which they were “designed.” (p. 133)

are functioning properly in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which *S*'s faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production of *B* are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of environment) is true; (p. 19)<sup>115</sup>

For ease of reference, we can parse this account into 4 jointly sufficient conditions:

*S*'s belief *B* is warranted for *S* if and only if:

- (1) the cognitive faculties that produced *B* were functioning properly
- (2) the cognitive environment in which *B* is produced is sufficiently similar to the one for which the relevant faculty was designed
- (3) the elements of the design plan for the faculty that produced *B* were aimed at producing true belief
- (4) there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in the way specified by the design plan is true

Condition (1) states merely that the cognitive module that produced the belief in question must have been functioning properly when it did so. In other words, the module must have been operating in the way that it was designed to operate. Condition (2) ensures that the environment in which the module was operating was the kind of environment presupposed by the design plan that governs the module. For example, a human's cognitive system wasn't designed to operate in a demon world, and so beliefs formed in that kind of environment will not meet condition (2). The condition that does the heavy epistemic lifting in the analysis of warrant is condition (3): the faculty that produced the belief must be designed to produce true beliefs. In the lingo of proper functionalism, the

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<sup>115</sup> Plantinga insists that this analysis is provisional or a first approximation. He later attempts to develop an extra condition to deal with Gettier cases. This addendum is irrelevant for my purposes here as it's implausible that moral perception would fail to generate warrant because moral perception is essentially some kind of Gettier case.

cognitive module must have a design plan that is aimed at truth. Arguably, not all of our systems are so aimed. The standard example is that of overly optimistic belief: sometimes humans form overly-optimistic beliefs when doing so aids survival (e.g. when coping with a deadly disease). In these cases, the person's mind is functioning properly, but the goal of the function in these limited cases is not the production of true belief but of survival-enhancing belief.<sup>116</sup> However, it is plausible that at least some cognitive systems have as their goals the production of true belief, and only beliefs produced by these systems are candidates for warrant. Finally, condition (4) requires that the design plan which governs the belief-producing cognitive module is a good one, i.e. it is a reliable producer of true belief. If a system were designed to produce true belief but wasn't very good at doing so (from an objective standpoint), then beliefs produced by this system will not be warranted.

While the foregoing account is certainly rough, it provides at least a sketch that can be applied to putative cases of moral perception. Consider again Harman's case. When the subject forms the moral belief in the face of the cat's torture, is that belief warranted for him? Unsurprisingly, I think that it is (or, at least there is no principled reason for thinking that it's not). Condition (1) is met just in case the subject in Harman's case is functioning properly (or more carefully, if the cognitive module that produces the belief in this case is functioning properly). Answering this question fully would require a detailed account of the epistemology of proper function. How can we tell when someone

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<sup>116</sup> It's an open question whether all cognitive systems have this goal instead of the truth goal. Plantinga exploits this fact in what's known as the evolutionary argument against naturalism.

or something is functioning properly? When is a claim that someone or something is functioning properly justified? While there is no standard methodology for determining when someone is functioning properly, the usual appeal in the contemporary literature is an argument by cases. Suppose someone comes to believe *P* in a certain situation. If we think that normal humans would come to believe the same thing in that environment, then we tend to think that this person was functioning properly.<sup>117</sup> For example, if I fail to form the belief ‘that’s a spoon’ after you wave one in my face and ask me what it is, then it is likely that you would conclude that something’s amiss. If this is an appropriate methodology, then the Harman case meets condition (1). It seems perfectly normal to form the belief ‘that’s wrong’ when confronted with the act of torture. In fact, we might go further and say that someone who did *not* form this belief was dysfunctional in some important respect. Think, for example, of sociopaths who fail to form moral beliefs in certain situations. The fact that we label such people as sociopaths indicates that we think that they are not functioning properly. The same can be said of the subject in Harman’s scenario. In short, it seems that forming a moral belief in response to the perceptual stimuli in this case is at best indicative of the fact that the person is functioning properly or at worst neutral between indicating proper function or dysfunction.

Conditions (2) is also relatively straightforward. (2) is met just in case Harman’s subject is in the kind of environment that his cognitive system was designed to operate in. To answer this question, we must get a handle on

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<sup>117</sup> McGrath rightly notes that this is a highly defeasible test. Still, I think that this is the actual procedure that we use when attempting to figure out whether someone is functioning properly.



precisely which cognitive system is at issue in the case. This, of course, is an instance of the generality problem. Is it the subject's perceptual faculties as a whole that are at issue? His capacity for sight in particular? His capacity to form moral beliefs in response to visual input? Demarcating the system will be particularly important in arguing for condition (3), but for now I suggest that we pick a common-sense demarcation of the system: the subject's perceptual faculties in general. After all, recall that condition (2) was initially intended by Plantinga to rule out demon-world-type counterexamples, and this is certainly not such a case. So our present question is whether or not the Harman subject is in the kind of environment for which his perceptual faculties were designed, and the answer is yes. He is on planet Earth in normal operating conditions (e.g. broad daylight) within easy sight of the hoodlums.

I shall treat condition (3) last, but consider briefly condition (4). (4) is met just in case the system that produces the moral belief in this case is generally reliable. I obviously can't extrapolate from one single case to show that the subject really is reliable at picking out moral qualities, and a full-length argument for reliability would take me too far afield. However, it's important to note two things. First, this is a difficult point to establish for *any* system of perception, including everyday sense perception of the external world. An argument for the reliability of external world perception would be blatantly circular because the only way to verify the sensual information from one modality is to check this against the sensual information of another modality and vice-versa. These circular arguments are either sufficient to demonstrate reliability or they are not.

If they are, then it is open to the defender of moral perception to offer a similarly circular argument for the reliability of moral perception. If they are not, then external world perception and moral perception are akin in the sense that we have no non-circular arguments for the reliability of either.

Second, there seems no principled reason to think that it is *impossible* for moral perception to be reliable. As long as a subject in fact formed moral beliefs that roughly corresponded to the moral facts, the system that produced such belief would be reliable. For instance, imagine that the subject in Harman's case formed the belief 'that's wrong' in all and only the cases in which he saw a living being lit on fire. Given plausible moral facts (e.g. that gratuitous pain is bad) and facts about our world (e.g. that living beings experience pain), this belief would be true in almost all of the nearby possible worlds in which a living being is set on fire, and thus the system that produced the belief would be reliable.<sup>118</sup> There is no good reason to think that such a thing couldn't be the case.

Finally, the most difficult portion of the case for perceptual moral knowledge under the assumption of proper functionalism is condition (3). Condition (3) is met in the Harman scenario just in case the cognitive system that produced the belief 'that's wrong' was designed to produce true beliefs. Here we face a particularly pressing instance of the generality problem. If we say simply that the cognitive system at issue is the subject's perceptual faculties, then it seems natural enough to claim that the system was in fact designed to produce

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<sup>118</sup> Here the proper functionalist account founders on the generality problem: how do we type cognitive modules so that they have more than one instance? I am in general skeptical of solving the generality problem in epistemology, and this provides a *pro tanto* case against both process reliabilism and any form of proper functionalism that relies on typing cognitive modules. However, I simply assume a solution to the generality problem for my discussion here.

true beliefs. But what if we draw the distinction much more narrowly? What if the system at issue is the one that produces only *moral* beliefs in the face of perceptual input. Is there such a system and might it be designed to produce true beliefs?

In my own view, the generality problem is difficult enough to warrant abandoning proper functionalist accounts of knowledge.<sup>119</sup> However, granting for the moment that the cognitive system at issue can be properly identified, three things might be said on behalf of moral perception meeting condition (3). First, one might respond in the way that Plantinga does with regard to religious belief. It has long been suggested (perhaps initially by Marx, Freud, *et alia* and most recently by Dennett, Dawkins, *et alia*) that religious beliefs are the result of either cognitive dysfunction or cognitive systems that were not designed to produce true religious beliefs but by systems that were designed to help us cope with hardships, etc. Plantinga responds in the following way: if theism is true, then it is very likely that human's cognitive systems are designed to produce true religious beliefs. One might defend the Harman case in the same conditional way: if theism is true, then it is probable that our perceptual faculties are designed to produce true moral beliefs when possible. This is because moral facts are important facts that a loving God would want people to be able to discern. I don't claim that this is a particularly promising response, but I note it here as it is one that has been relied on in the contemporary literature by a number of defenders of proper functionalism.

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<sup>119</sup> Feldman and Conee (1998) argue for a similar point in rejecting reliabilism about knowledge.

Second, the defender of perceptual moral knowledge can respond to challenges of condition (3) with a *tu quoque*: this same question arises for *any* moral belief on the proper functionalist picture of knowledge not just perceptual moral beliefs. True enough: a defender of perceptual moral knowledge must show how moral belief produced as the result of perceptual input is the result of a proper functioning cognitive module that has a design plan aimed at true moral belief, but a defender of moral knowledge *simpliciter* has a similar burden to bear. If we have moral knowledge at all on the proper functionalist view, then there must be some subset of human cognitive faculties that are designed to produce true moral belief. And so while it's true that the defender of perceptual moral knowledge faces this problem on a proper functionalist account, this is a real problem for moral knowledge more generally given a proper functionalist background, and it's not obvious how the more general concern can be answered.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, it seems that our perceptual cognitive systems are designed to learn. For example, my perceptual system was not designed to tell Mac's from PC's, and yet it's silly to think that my perceptual belief that '*that's* a Mac computer' is not warranted for me because I do not have a perceptual cognitive system that was designed to tell Mac's from PC's. One might say, perhaps, that my ability to determine Mac's from PC's is parasitical on my ability to discern other facts such as color, size, etc. In this case, one might say that my perceptual faculties *were* designed to produce true beliefs about color, size, etc., and since my belief that '*that's* a Mac computer' is

the result of perceiving the color, size, etc. of the computer, then it is true that the belief '*that's* a Mac computer' was produced by perceptual faculties that were aimed at truth.

If this is an attractive answer in the computer case, it will also serve my purposes in the Harman case. Suppose it's true that none of our perceptual cognitive modules are designed to produce true moral beliefs, *per se*. Still, the modules are designed to produce true beliefs about color, size, etc., and perceptual moral beliefs are parasitical on these. After all, perception is really just pattern recognition, and if our perceptual systems are (A) designed to recognize certain lower-level patterns and (B) designed to learn to produce beliefs in response to various sequences of lower-level patterns, then there is no principled reason for thinking that our perceptual systems might not be designed (in this parasitical way) to produce true moral beliefs in response to certain perceptual stimuli.<sup>120</sup> Thus, (3) is met in putative cases of moral perception.

This argument for the obtaining of condition (3) completes my case for perceptual moral knowledge on a proper functionalist framework. Like all externalist accounts of knowledge, the best that one can give is a conditional answer to challenges of knowledge: *if* the external conditions are met, then we

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<sup>120</sup> One might object to this strategy in the following way. The computer beliefs are really the result of inference, and we know a premise that links what the computer looks like to its being either a Mac or a PC. For example, I know that if it is white with a small apple logo on the front of it, then it is a Mac. There are three things to be said in response to this objection. First, my computer beliefs are not the result of inference, unless one means by 'inference' subconscious inference or something like that. Second, if we grant that the computer belief is a result of an inference, this means that my belief about the computer is not epistemically basic. Third, even if we grant that the computer belief is a result of inference, there is not a non-*ad hoc* reason for thinking that we cannot have linking premises for moral beliefs as well. Here's one that I know: when a scene looks the way it does to the subject in Harman's example, the boys are doing something morally wrong.

have knowledge in such-and-such a case. I have provided a *pro tanto* case for thinking that the necessary and sufficient conditions for warrant can be met in a case of moral perception, and I have thereby provided a *pro tanto* case for perceptual moral knowledge on the proper functionalist framework.

#### **4.6 The Argument from Disagreement and Perceptual Moral Knowledge**

I have argued that given any of the aforementioned accounts of perceptual knowledge, in at least some cases moral perception is sufficient for moral knowledge. This completes the argument for my central thesis, to wit, the claim that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. However, it might be objected that this knowledge is immediately defeated by certain defeaters that undermine moral knowledge. As many of the potential defeaters for moral knowledge are alike for any moral epistemology, I shall not treat them further here. However, it might seem that the argument from disagreement is worse given the possibility of perceptual moral knowledge. This is because when two people disagree about a perceptual matter, this oftentimes provides both of them with a reason to withhold belief. And since we disagree a great deal over matters of morality, this fact might serve as a defeater to perceptual moral knowledge. In this final section I shall show why the argument from disagreement is not more potent even given the possibility of perceptual moral knowledge.

The objection from disagreement functions as an undercutting defeater. Take any belief *P*. A rebutting defeater is a reason to think that *P* is false whereas an undercutting defeater is a reason to think that *P* lacks a positive epistemic status (e.g. justification, knowledge, etc.). For example, if I believe that

God exists because of a religious experience, an argument from evil constitutes a rebutting defeater for my belief, while a criticism of the epistemic value of religious experience in general is an undercutting defeater for that belief. The objection from moral disagreement is an undercutting defeater because it purports to impugn the process by which moral beliefs are formed.<sup>121</sup>

It is obvious why the objection from disagreement appears to have more teeth given the possibility of perceptual moral knowledge. If moral knowledge comes only by way of difficult and abstruse reasoning, then it's not so hard to see why there is a lot of moral disagreement. However, if moral knowledge is perceptual, one would expect there to be very little moral disagreement. After all, we rarely disagree on perceptual matters. We don't find wide disagreement about what color the sky is, how many stripes are on the US flag or whether a wine is sweet or dry.

We should be clear about precisely when disagreement poses an epistemic problem. Consider again the Harman case. If the subject comes to believe that what the boys did was wrong, whereas someone on the other side of town does not, this sort of disagreement doesn't endanger the subject's moral knowledge (even if we grant that he becomes aware of the fact that a stranger on the other side of town lacks the belief about what the boys have done). In this case, the subject and the dissident have different evidence. One had moral perception, and the other did not. The troubling case is one in which the putative knower and the dissident share the same body of evidence. Suppose that the subject in the Harman case comes to believe that what the boys did was wrong

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<sup>121</sup> See Paul 1994.

whereas his companion does not. When the subject becomes aware of the fact that his companion saw the boys from the same vantage point and yet does not believe that what they did was wrong, does this awareness undercut his moral knowledge?

The key to answering this question is to determine whether or not disagreement would be surprising given the possibility of perceptual moral knowledge. I think that there are two reasons for thinking that it would not be surprising. First, one might maintain that moral disagreement is the result in a difference of faculties.<sup>122</sup> It is plausible that the high level of agreement in standard cases of perception is the result of humans being “hard-wired” to form certain beliefs in certain circumstances. We are, for example, hard-wired to detect the color of the sky or the sweetness of a wine. On the face of it, if humans were hard-wired to form moral beliefs by perception, then we would expect this same level of overlap. However, note that some humans lack the “hard-wiring” to form perceptual beliefs in areas of inquiry outside of morality. For example, people who are colorblind are unable to discern the color of the sky, and people who are deficient in taste buds are unable to discern the sweetness of a wine. The fact that someone who is colorblind disagrees with us about the color of the sky doesn’t give us a defeater for our belief that the sky is blue. Similarly, if some people were “morally-blind,” the fact that they disagreed

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<sup>122</sup> I note that this move is especially appealing to Christians who acknowledge original sin. According to the standard doctrine, humans are cognitively deficient in some important way as a result of original sin, and this might extend to our abilities to detect moral qualities as well.



with us about the wrongness of an action wouldn't give us a defeater for our belief that the action was wrong.<sup>123</sup>

Second, a more promising response grants that all humans are roughly alike in their hard-wiring but insists that the disagreement in moral cases is the result of learning. For example, doctors are able to see that a wound is infected. Most of us are not able to see this. But the fact that we disagree doesn't give the doctor a reason to give up his belief that the wound is infected. I am able to see that my child is embarrassed. Most other people are not able to see this. But the fact that others would disagree with me about whether or not my child is embarrassed doesn't give me a reason to abandon my belief that he is embarrassed. Perhaps something similar can be said in the moral case: disagreement concerning moral matters is unsurprising because moral perception requires a learning process and not all of us have engaged in the appropriate learning process. In the Harman case, had the subject not had any experience with fire or cats or pain, then perhaps he would not be able to see that what the boys were doing was wrong. It would be nice to say something more substantive about the nature of this learning process and the explanation for a wide-variance of learning among humans, but at this point I am concerned only to show that disagreement *need* not constitute a defeater for moral knowledge even if we grant that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.

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<sup>123</sup> McGrath is worried by the fact that there do not seem to be people who acknowledge their moral blindness in the way that there are individuals who acknowledge their color blindness. Perhaps this difference undermines the analogy, but I leave that an open question here. I do note, however, that there are some folks that we acknowledge as being morally blind in certain ways, e.g. sociopaths.

One might respond as follows. Awareness of disagreement constitutes a defeater for knowledge unless one has a ready explanation for the variance among believers.<sup>124</sup> In the moral case, we cannot account for the disagreement whereas in the paradigm cases in which disagreement is not a problem, we can. For example, the doctor has a ready explanation for why he can see that the wound is infected whereas the average person cannot—he has received special training. That is why the disagreement doesn't affect the epistemic status of his belief. But since we have no ready explanation in the moral case, our awareness of disagreement undercuts any moral knowledge that perception might provide.

First, even if we grant the epistemic principle that motivates this objection, I have offered two different explanations for the variance in moral cases (i.e. difference in hard-wiring or difference in learning). Second, even if these explanations are deficient, the epistemic principle motivating the objection is false. It's not true that awareness of disagreement undercuts knowledge unless the putative knower has a ready explanation for the disagreement. Take a simple example: you and I are looking out the window, and I see a cardinal in the tree and come to believe '*that's* a cardinal'. You disagree and say so. I don't yet have an explanation for our disagreement. Is it true that I don't know that the bird is a cardinal? I don't think so.

In fact, if the epistemic principle at issue were true, there would be very little religious, moral or philosophical knowledge more generally. That is because there is a wide diversity of beliefs in these areas of inquiry, and very few of us are in a position to offer a ready explanation for the disagreement. If the principle is

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<sup>124</sup> Peter Markie offers just such an objection.

true, none of us knows that there is an external world, that we're free, that at least some actions are morally wrong, that at least some of us are morally responsible, etc.<sup>125</sup> I submit that this is a very high cost.

I conclude that it isn't enough for an objector to point to a wide disagreement concerning moral claims more generally. He also bears the burden of proof of showing that this disagreement poses an epistemic problem for perceptual moral knowledge, and I have provided two plausible explanation for why it need not be a problem. In particular, it is reasonable to think that there would be very little disagreement among people concerning the moral status of the action in the Harman case, and thus it seems that disagreement need not affect all instances of moral belief. My tentative conclusion, then, is that moral disagreement need not defeat moral knowledge on the supposition that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.

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<sup>125</sup> In fact, contemporary philosophers disagree among themselves over the epistemic import of disagreement and hence the truth of epistemic principles such as that under consideration here. Thus, if the principle is true, then no one knows that it's true unless he is in a position to explain the present disagreement among contemporary philosophers!

## Afterword

I have argued that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual. In doing so, I have argued for the possibility of moral perception. My view naturally raises the following question: if we can see moral properties or come to know moral facts on the basis of perception, what else can we perceive or come to know by way of perception? Might we perceive modal facts? religious facts? logical facts? In what follows I briefly consider the limits of perception and argue for a principled line between moral perception and other putative kinds of perception.

Corresponding to the internal and external constraints on perception, I think that the limits of perception are set by two features. First, the perceiving agent must be able to have a perceptual experience as if the property in question is instantiated. In other words, perception requires representational content. If it is not possible for a perceptual experience to represent, say, a modal property, then modal perception is impossible. I argued in chapter 2 that putative cases of moral perception meet this constraint as it is reasonable to think that moral facts can be represented in the appropriate way.

I won't rest my case of delimiting moral perception from other types of perception on this first condition as I think that there is not a non-*ad hoc* reason for thinking that an agent might not (via learning experiences or whatever) come to have perceptual experiences that represent, say, religious properties. If anything like John Pollock's account is correct, then agents can come to associate just about any propositional content with just about any perceptual data

in such a way that perceptual experiences that result from that data come to represent the content in question. So I don't hold out much hope for drawing any substantive limitations to perception on this front.

However, corresponding roughly to the external constraints on perception, I think that certain external facts must hold for perception to be possible. This is a more promising avenue to craft a principled limit to our perceptual abilities. In particular, I think that there must be a tight connection between the physical elements that cause a perceptual experience (call the totality of these elements the 'perceptual environment') and the content of the perceptual experience. Suppose that a perceptual environment  $E$  causes a perceptual experience that  $P$ . One might cash out the tight connection between  $E$  and  $P$  as a subjunctive conditional: it wouldn't be  $E$  unless it were  $P$ . In other words,  $E$  is indicative of  $P$ . This is the sort of restriction that we saw in Dretske's account of perceptual knowledge. This is also one way of putting the motivation behind the Looks Objection that we encountered in chapter 2: perception requires a way that a physical scene can look that is indicative of the purported property's obtaining.<sup>126</sup>

The reason that I think something along these lines is a promising approach to delimiting perception is because I think that moral facts meet plausible candidate principles whereas, say, modal facts do not. The fact that one's perceptual environment is such and such is at least sometimes indicative

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<sup>126</sup> What then about the limits of perceptual justification? Certainly external factors like a causal connection won't be able to draw a principled line between cases of justified perceptual belief and non-justified perceptual belief (e.g. consider evil demon scenarios). My own view is that perceptual justification tracks how an agent has been appeared to. Being appeared to as if  $X$  is  $F$  is sufficient for *prima facie* justification for the belief that  $X$  is  $F$ . Then the limits of perceptual justification will be co-extensional with the limits of how an agent can be appeared to.

of moral facts. For example, in the Harman case, the perceptual environment is tightly connected with the moral facts of the case: had the physical facts been relevantly different, the moral facts would have also been different. In other words, the moral facts in the Harman case are sensitive to the perceptual environment. This is because moral facts are either reducible to or supervene on the natural facts that are (at least partly) responsible for the subject's perceptual experience. And more generally, in at least some cases, moral facts are sensitive to the perceptual environment: change the physical facts in ways that are detectable to the subject, and the moral facts will change as well.

Notice that the same cannot be said for, say, religious facts. Suppose that it's a fact that God is eternal. This fact is not sensitive to one's perceptual environment, and so it's not the kind of thing that we can come to know by perception. The same, I think, can be said of mathematical facts, logical facts, modal facts, etc.

Interestingly, this same line of thought illustrates the limits of *moral* perception as well. If a moral fact is not tightly connected to one's perceptual environment, then it's not the kind of fact that we can come to know via perception. Suppose, for example, that it's wrong to think badly of one's colleague. Suppose further that the perceptual environment that causes me to have a perceptual experience of you doesn't change when you are thinking such thoughts. If this is the case, then, in this case, I am unable to perceive that you are doing something wrong. This is because the moral facts are not tightly

connected with the perceptual environment (or, in terms of the Looks Objection, there is no way that you look that is indicative of you're thinking such thoughts).

While this is admittedly a rough sketch of the limits of perception, I think that it is a promising line worthy of further refinement and defense. And I think that the proposal accurately captures what we intuitively want of an account of perception—in perception we come to know certain facts because of the way that the perceptual environment affects us. Thus, a nice way to limit the facts of which perception can inform us is to attempt to get clear on the connection between the perceptual environment and the relevant facts. If the facts don't depend on the perceptual environment in some direct (though admittedly under-described) way, then it's hard to see how the perceptual environment can inform us of anything with regard to those facts. And since I think that in at least some cases (e.g. the Harman case), there is a close connection between the perceptual environment and moral facts, I think that perception is a source of moral information in at least some cases.

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## VITA

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