

# Moral Perception Defended

*Robert Audi*

*University of Notre Dame*

## Abstract

This paper outlines my theory of moral perception, extends the theory beyond its previous statements, and defends it from a number of objections posed in the literature. The paper distinguishes the perceptible from the perceptual; develops a structural analogy between perception and action; explains how moral perception, despite its normative status, can be causal in the way appropriate to genuine perception; clarifies the respects in which moral perception is representational; and indicates how it provides an objective basis for moral knowledge. In the light of this account of moral perception, its presentational character is described, particularly the phenomenological integration between our moral sensibility and our non-moral perception of the various kinds of natural properties that ground moral properties. The complexity of this integration raises the question whether moral perception is inferential and thereby quite different from ordinary perception. This question is answered by clarifying the notion of inference and by pursuing an analogy between moral perception and perception of emotion. Aesthetic perception is also considered as, within limits, instructively analogous to moral perception. The final parts of the paper explore the role of cognitive penetration and cognitive attitudes such as belief and judgment in relation to moral perception; the conceptual and developmental aspects of moral perception; and the latitude my overall account of it allows in the epistemology and ontology of ethics.

*Keywords:* action-perception analogy, cognitive penetration, consequentiality, inference, moral knowledge, moral phenomenology, observability, perceptibility, phenomenological integration, representation.

The topic of perception is crucial for many fields of philosophy. Epistemology, philosophy of mind, and aesthetics are obvious cases, but metaphysics, too, concerns the nature of perceived objects and, of course, what it implies about the constitution of perceivers. In ethics, by contrast, most major writers have taken for granted that there is perceptual knowledge and have considered any moral knowledge we possess to be largely dependent on perceptual knowledge but quite different in kind. In recent years, however, philosophers have been exploring the analogy between singular moral cognitions and non-moral perceptions, and some have argued—as I have in considerable detail—that moral phenomena are genuinely perceptible and that moral perception can ground percep-

tual moral knowledge of its objects.<sup>1</sup> This paper will both summarize some essentials of my account and extend it by responding to some problems that have not yet been given the scrutiny they deserve.

## 1. Outline of a Theory of Moral Perception

Moral philosophers have not doubted that we can perceive—say, see or hear—phenomena that are moral in nature, such as a bombing of non-combatants or a brutal stabbing. But it is essential to distinguish between *moral perception* and mere *perception of a moral phenomenon*. The latter may be simply perception of a deed that has moral properties—something possible for a dog. Seeing a deed that has a moral property—for example the property of being wrong—does not entail seeing its wrongness, any more than seeing a beautiful painting entails seeing its beauty. We can hear a lie, as where, just after we see A receive change for a hundred-dollar bill, A tells B (who needs a small loan) that A has no more cash. Can we, however, also morally perceive the lie—thereby perceiving *the wrong* that such a lie implies?

### *The perceptible and the observable*

I have argued in detail that such moral perception is possible and apparently not uncommon. If so, we may take literally discourse that represents moral properties—or apparent moral properties—as perceptible. One objection to taking such discourse literally is that we do not see or in any sense perceive moral properties, but only non-moral properties or non-moral events that evidence their presence. Skeptics and noncognitivists may go further: they might say that, at best, we perceive natural properties that cause us to tend to ascribe moral properties (or apply moral predicates) to their possessors or to express moral judgments about the acts, persons, or other things that are objects of moral appraisal. I grant that much of what I say about moral perception does not preclude a certain skepticism about achieving moral knowledge and also leaves open the possibility of noncognitivist or other anti-realist reinterpretations on which there are no moral properties but instead moral attitudes and moral language appropriate to them. In *Moral Perception* (especially chapters 1-3) my response to this view and to skepticism is indirect, and it will be here: I simply aim to present a more plausible alternative.

Suppose the causal hypothesis just mentioned is true and that it is because we perceive certain non-moral properties that we tend to ascribe moral properties—and we tend to say that we see, for instance, wrongdoing. Philosophers should still ask what relations hold between the two sorts of properties<sup>2</sup> and, correspondingly, between non-moral cognitions and moral ones, such as moral judgments. Second, we should ask whether these relations differ importantly from relations common outside the moral realm. Third, if the two kinds of rela-

<sup>1</sup> The most detailed statement of my theory of moral perception is presented in Audi 2013, which, in the opening section of this paper and in a few later passages, I draw on heavily, though with some revisions.

<sup>2</sup> As suggested in the text, I assume here that there are moral properties. If my position on moral perception is plausible, that in itself provides reason to favor cognitivism in ethics. For one thing, perceptual beliefs are paradigms of cognition.

tion do differ importantly, does the difference show that we do not acquire moral knowledge or moral justification through moral perceptions of the kinds I have illustrated?

To begin with, we should set aside certain unwarranted assumptions that may seem plausible. Above all, we should not expect moral perception to be exactly like physical perception, at least exactly like perceiving everyday visible objects seen in normal light (I take vision as paradigmatic for perception, as is common in philosophy). First, moral properties are not easily conceived as *observable*, in what seems the most elementary way: no sensory phenomenal representation is possible for them, as opposed to intellectual representation, though sensory representations, especially of actions, may be integrated with phenomenal elements, including certain moral emotions, that are distinctive of moral experience. Second, even the perceptible properties on which the possession of certain moral properties is based may not be strictly speaking observable, at least in this elementary way. On my view, you can see one person do a wrong to another by, for example, seeing the first slashing the tires of the other's car. The slashing is uncontroversially observable. It is an "observable fact." But what we may be properly said to observe here may be not just a matter of what we visually perceive; it may also reflect what we already know, such as that the car belongs to the second person, not the first. We must grant, however, that even though you can visually observe the basis of the wrongdoing, your seeing the wrongdoing depends on your understanding, to at least some degree, the normative significance of the destruction of someone else's property. Moral perception presupposes both non-moral perception and a certain background understanding of interpersonal relations that, even if quite unsophisticated, enables the moral character of what is perceived to affect the perceiver's sensibility.

#### *The analogy between perception and action*

At this point we can learn much from considering the analogy between perception and action. Conceived in terms of what might be called success conditions, action and perception have different "directions of fit" to the world. Action succeeds (at least in an agent-relative sense appropriate to intentional action) when it changes the world to fit the relevant aim(s) of the agent; perception succeeds when it represents a change (or state) in a perceived object, where the perception fits—i.e., in some sense correctly represents—the world. There is a sense in which action goes from the inside out, and perception goes from the outside in. These are rough formulations; but they are a good starting point, and good theories of action and perception should enable us to refine them in illuminating ways.<sup>3</sup>

A second aspect of the analogy between perception and action is important for understanding moral perception. Just as we do not do anything at all without doing something *basically*, i.e., by doing it other than *by* doing something else, and, in that way, "at will," we do not perceive anything at all other than by perceiving something basically, say by simply seeing its colors and shapes, as with visual perception of a tree. Now consider a counterpart case of action: my greet-

<sup>3</sup> A recent example of theorizing that focuses significantly on parallels between perception and action is Sosa 2015.

ing you. I cannot do this without, for instance, raising my hand. I greet you *by* raising my hand. But for me, as for most people, that is a basic act: I do not do it by doing anything else. *Someone* might be able to move the relevant muscles at will; I cannot: I can move them only by moving my hand. This shows that there is a difference between a movement I make as an action and a movement of or in my body necessary for the action. Similarly, I see a tree by seeing its colored foliage and its shape, but I do not see these by seeing anything else. Granted, I cannot in fact see them without their conveying light to my visual system, but *that* set of events is not my basic perception. Moreover, neither the visual system's reception of the light nor my seeing the colors and shapes is a kind of doing, conceived as a volitional phenomenon, much as neither my raising my arm nor my muscle movements underlying that action are perceptual phenomena. The structural parallels between action and perception do not undermine the ontological differences between them.

We can now see how basic perceptions reveal *the perceptible*, something we can be perceptually aware of *by* (say) seeing. Some perceptible entities are not perceived basically but only by perceiving something else—in the sense of something distinct from it even if intimately connected with it in the way that raising a hand can be intimately connected with greeting. We can see this point more clearly by considering whether the kind of perceptibility in question is a matter of being, for us, *observable*, where the object is constituted roughly by what is, for us, perceivable basically. The 'for us' reveals a species-relativity, but not the subjectivism implied by taking the 'for' to be doxastic, say entailing that what we observe depends on what we believe in the situation. The relativity view here is that a given species or subspecies tends to have a characteristic basic level of perception; it is not that the concept of perception requires positing an absolutely basic level across all species capable of perception. More generally, for any perceiving being and any time, there is a perceptually basic level for that perceiver at that time; but it does not follow, and I believe is not true, that there is some "ultimate" perceptual level that is basic for every perceiver at every time.

Now consider injustice as a major moral phenomenon. Is it ever observable, in the most basic sense, which apparently goes with perceptual properties, roughly the kind basic for us? Is seeing injustice, for example, observational in the sense corresponding to the perceptual properties of color, shape, and motion? Or is such moral perception equivalent to seeing—in a distinctive way that is at least not narrowly observational—a set of "base properties" for injustice, such as a patently unequal distribution of needed food to starving children, where these properties are seen in a way that makes it obvious, upon seeing them, that an injustice is done? The second alternative points in the right direction, and the remainder of this section will clarify the distinctive way in which moral perception may be visual and thereby a case of seeing. We should begin with some further points about the consequentiality of moral properties.

In asking about the relation between moral perception and seeing the relevant base properties, i.e., properties on which injustice is *consequential*, I assume something widely held: that actions and other bearers of moral properties do not have those properties *brutely*, but on the *basis* of (consequentially on) having "descriptive" properties. Consequential properties may also be called *grounded* or *resultant*, terms that also indicate that a thing possesses the consequential (grounded) properties *because* it possesses the base properties. An act is not simply wrong, in the way in which an act can be simply a moving of one's hand

(though in certain underlying ways even such basic acts are not simple). It is essential to the wrongness of an act that is wrong that it be wrong *on the basis of* being a lie, or *because* it is a promise-breaking, or *as* a stabbing, and so forth. Similarly, a person is not simply good, but good *on the basis of*, or *because of*, or *as*, having good governing motives together with beliefs appropriate to guide one toward constructive ends.<sup>4</sup>

If, however, we see moral properties on the basis of seeing non-moral properties, the question arises—or at any rate philosophers will ask—whether one ever really sees a moral phenomenon, such as an injustice. Recall the distinction between seeing an action that is wrong and seeing its wrongness. It is not controversial that one can see a deed that *is* wrong (unjust, a violation of a moral right, and so forth); this requires simply seeing the deed and its in fact being wrong. We can also see *that* a wrong is done. But do we even in the former case literally see such properties as wrongness or injustice? Consider seeing a babysitter consuming the last piece of chocolate cake and then later accusing a child of eating it. Do we not, given what we know, see and hear wrongdoing in the accusation? We do, but the moral perception this illustrates is not the elementary kind of perception illustrated by seeing the shape of a tree.

It would be a mistake, then, to think that the phenomenal elements in perception properly so called must be sensory in the representational way that characterizes paradigms of seeing and some of the exercises of the other senses among the five ordinary senses. But why should we expect perception of injustice, which is not a basic perception for us and has a normative, non-sensory phenomenon as object, to be just like perceptions of color, shape, motion, flavor, or sound, which are physical or in any case sensory, non-normative, and, in typical cases, basic for us? Why should there not be, for instance, a phenomenal sense of injustice that is—appropriately, on my view—not “pictorial” in the way exemplified by the visual impression of a tree or a painting? Here it is well worth considering non-visual perception. Where a moral perception is auditory, as with hearing a lie, or tactual, as with feeling a stab in the back, we are not tempted to expect it to be pictorial, at least in the way visual experience of many kinds of things may be taken to be.

One might still think that genuine perceptual experience must be cartographic, having content that provides a “mapping” from phenomenal properties, such as a tactual impression of a shape one can feel in darkness, to physical properties causing the impression. From sensations of touch one can “map” the shape and size of a box felt in the dark. But wrongdoing and, on the positive side, justice, do not admit of mapping, even when they can be seen in a mappable distribution of boxes, as where a supply of food from the United Nations is placed symmetrically on the ground for equal distribution to needy families waiting for help. What we see must be perceptible; but even if *perceptible proper-*

<sup>4</sup> That moral properties are consequential is a view articulated in Moore 1903 and Ross 1930, esp. ch. 2. It is developed further in ch. 2 of Audi 2004. I here presuppose that certain properties, such as, on the negative side, killing and, on the positive side, promising are a priori grounds of moral properties, but my theory of the nature of moral properties does not require a particular list of such grounds or indeed a particular list of moral properties.

*ties*, such as being wrong or unjust,<sup>5</sup> must be seen by seeing *perceptual properties* (often called observable or considered to be expressed by “observations terms”) such as bodily movements, not all perceptible properties are perceptual. The senses can yield the base by which we see certain perceptible properties without their being on the same level as the perceptual properties pictured or mapped by the senses. To make the relevant notion of perceptibility clearer, we must explore the sense which moral perception is representational.

## 2. The Representational Character of Moral Perception

Given what we have seen so far, we should distinguish two kinds of demands one might make on a theory of moral perception. One demand requires the theory to provide a phenomenal—and especially, a cartographic—representation of, say, injustice. The second, more plausible demand centers on a phenomenal representation constituted by a (richer) perceptual *response* to injustice. The sense of injustice, then, a kind of impression of it, *as* based on, and as phenomenally integrated with, a suitable ordinary perception of the properties on which injustice is consequential—on which it is *grounded*, in a main use of that term—might serve as the experiential element in moral perception. Let me develop this view—call it an *integration theory of moral perception*.

### *Sensing physically versus sensing morally*

An important constituent in this phenomenal integration is the perceiver’s felt sense of connection between, on the one hand, the impression of, say, injustice or (on the positive side) beneficence and, on the other hand, the properties that ground the moral phenomena. This felt connection is at least akin to what some have called the sense of fittingness. The sense of connection I am describing normally produces, moreover, a non-inferential disposition to attribute the moral property of the action (or other phenomenon in question) on the basis the property or set of properties (of that action) on which the moral property is grounded. Suppose, for instance, that I see injustice in a distribution, say, a larger box of food for a family smaller than the other families standing in line for the distribution of one per family. My sense of injustice normally yields a disposition to believe that distribution to be wrong *because* it is (on the ground that it is), say, giving more to one family in the same needy position. My awareness of injustice, however, if perceptual, is non-inferential.<sup>6</sup> It is not based on any premise but is a direct response to what I see. The directness is, of course, epistemic and not causal—philosophical analysis places no restrictions on what causal processes may occur in the brain. A related point is that the perception is not and certainly need not be tied to the term ‘injustice’ or any synonym. Any of a range of terms may be appropriate, and we may indeed leave open the extent to which the property-attribution depends of the perceiver’s use of language at all.

<sup>5</sup> Perceptibility here is relative to circumstances: the perceptibility (for us) of wrongness does not entail that every kind of wrongness is perceptible (say plagiarism); but same holds for heat, which is perceptible (for us) only within a certain range.

<sup>6</sup> More is said later to explain why many moral attributions can be non-inferential.

Any kind of perception, on my view, is experiential in having *some* appearance in consciousness—though (apart from self-perception) not entailing *self*-consciousness or any internally directed attitude. *Moral* perception in some way embodies a phenomenal sense—which may (but need not) be in some way emotional—of the moral character of the act. This sense may, for instance, be felt disapproval, or even a kind of revulsion, as where we see a man deliberately spill hot tea on his wife’s hand in retaliation for her embarrassing him. The sense need not be highly specific; it may, for instance, be a felt *unfittingness* between the deed and the context, as where we see male and female children treated unequally in a distribution of medical supplies for patients with the same infectious disease. Similarly, but on the positive, approbative side, a felt *fittingness* may play a positive phenomenal role in moral perception. Think of the sense of moral rebalancing if one sees the unequal distribution of medicine rectified by a health professional who takes over the case. The equality of treatment befits the equality of need.

In each instance of moral perception, the moral sense of wrongness, injustice or, in the positive case, of welcome rebalancing is essentially connected to perception of non-moral properties on which the moral properties are grounded. In cases like these, we might be said to *sense morally*, rather as someone who hears a melody in a howling wind blowing through open drain pipes might be said to sense musically. This is not because moral properties (or comparable aesthetic ones) are sensory—they are not—nor because there is a special moral faculty dedicated to the ethical realm, but because there is a kind of perceptual experience that manifests moral sensibility and appropriately incorporates a response to the properties that ground the moral property that we sense.<sup>7</sup> Perceptibility through our moral sensibility is wider than, though it depends on, perceptuality at the level of observable properties accessible to the five senses.

Consider the vivid description we find in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the [injured] man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite . . . passed by on the other side. A Samaritan . . . came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him’, he said . . .’ (Luke 10: 34-37).

The wounded man is a pitiful sight to which even a child might respond with a kind of distress. We are to see the priest and Levite as either lacking moral perception or, if not, responding instead to contrary motivation, whereas the

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that “Moral perception is a form of pattern recognition”, as does Max Harris Siegel in setting out my view in his generally clear and quite informative review of my *Moral Perception* (Siegel 2014: 239). Some moral perceptions may be cases of pattern recognition, but not all are—even if each case *has* some pattern—since the grounding relations essential for moral perceptions need not yield a familiar pattern. But I do cite pattern recognition, e.g., with faces, as an example in which perception may require information-processing, yet need not entail inference.

Samaritan has a strong sense of what he ought to do. Granted, pity alone could yield the action, but the continuation of the story suggests a perception of the kind manifesting a sensitivity to the obligation of beneficence. Phenomenologically, seeing the wounded man as wronged or seeing what one ought to do, or both, may have experiential elements blended with pity. Indeed, the moral perception here may be *bi-modal*, with sounds of pain emanating from the wounded man combining with the visual spectacle. Perception is not limited to receptivity by only one sense at a time. Just as the sense of harmony in music or of gracefulness in dance depends on both one's aesthetic sensibility and what is directly perceived through both sight and hearing, moral perceptions depend on both one's moral sensibility and what one perceives. Moral perception achieves an integration of elements that come from the constitution of one's sensibility with elements perceived on the occasion of its stimulation.<sup>8</sup>

*The multi-leveled character of perception*

One way to view the theory of perception I have outlined is to consider it *layered*. We can accommodate moral perception by incorporating into our theory of perception a distinction between perceptual representations of an ordinary sensory kind that are low-level and perceptual representations that are of a richer kind and are higher-level, being based in part on ordinary sensory representations. Can this layered, multi-level theory of perception, however, explain how moral perception can have a causal character? It can. To see how in a familiar kind of non-moral case, consider recognizing a person in an airport. The property of being Rosaria (construed as including at least her essential characteristics) does not cause my recognition of her; the causal work is done mainly by the properties of color and shape (or their instances) that identify her to me as Rosaria. Similarly, moral perception should not—and I think need not—be taken to be causal by treating (moral) perceptual property instances, such as seeing injustice, as causally produced or sustained by instances of moral properties. The causal work is done mainly by the base properties.

The theory of moral perception developed here is neutral regarding the possibility that moral properties themselves are causal. It does, however, construe seeing certain subsets of base properties for, say, injustice as—at least given appropriate understanding of their connection to moral properties—a kind of perception of a moral property; and this kind includes, as elements, such ordinary perceptions as seeing a violent seizure of woman's purse and hearing a loud cat-call aimed at preventing a priest from saying a prayer. Depending on our psychological constitution, we may be unable to witness these things without a phenomenal sense of wrongdoing integrated with our perceptual representation of the wrong-making facts.<sup>9</sup> For many people, certain perceptible wrongs perpetrated in their presence are morally salient and unignorable. For many of us,

<sup>8</sup> Here one might recall the element of felt demand cited by Maurice Mandelbaum (1955). See, e.g., pp. 48-49, where he speaks of situations of acute human need as "extorting" action from us.

<sup>9</sup> For related work developing a partial phenomenology of moral perception see Horgan and Timmons 2008. They also explore phenomenological aspects of fittingness.



then, moral perceptions of certain salient moral wrongs committed in our field of vision or hearing are virtually unavoidable.

So far, the relation between moral perception and moral knowledge has been left implicit. More must be said about this. It is one thing to hold that there are genuine moral perceptions and another to take them to ground *knowledge* or justification regarding the moral phenomenon perceived. I defend both views but do not take the epistemic power of moral perception to depend, in a way it might seem to, on the perceiver's possessing a priori knowledge. One might think

[T]hat the epistemic credentials of moral phenomenal responses are derivative of subject's grasping ostensibly synthetic a priori entailments between moral properties and their non-moral grounds, which will presumably be a non-empirical matter. Hence, moral 'perceptual' knowledge looks to be crucially dependent upon substantive non-empirical knowledge (Cowan 2014: 1169).

Four points are crucial here. First, a sensitivity to the properties on which moral properties are grounded does not require believing the conceptually high-level propositions that link the former properties to the latter or grasping the relations that provide this link. Second, even if it did, my view of moral perception allows that these linking propositions and relations be empirical. Thirdly, regarding moral judgments, the ability of moral perception to justify these judgments does not depend on the modality of the underlying process by which the perception arises: the important thing is that the process be sufficiently justificatory or adequately evidential (say, reliable) and that the perceptual content (understood in terms of properties one is perceptually aware of) be relevant to that of the judgment. Fourth, sufficiency of justification or evidence here need not be taken to imply that the relevant grounds are "conclusive" evidence for the moral properties they indicate. The notion of moral perception leaves open just how tight a connection is required, though a merely accidental connection is ruled out. Viewing a stabbing may give even a child a basis for taking the assailant to be doing wrong, even if the child does not yet have the general belief that stabbings are wrong and even if their wrongness should be only empirically implied by their harmful character and the relevant probability is below 1.

#### *Moral perception as a basis for moral knowledge*

We have seen the difference between a moral perception of wrongdoing and a perception that is merely of an act that *is* wrong. We have also seen that moral perception does not entail the formation of moral belief or moral judgment. Still, although moral perception is not belief-entailing, it remains true that given how—if we understand moral phenomena—we see certain base properties that are sufficient for injustice, we sometimes perceptually know, and are perceptually justified in believing, that, for instance, one person is doing an injustice to another. We are thus justified in seeing the deed *as* an injustice. When we have such perceptual knowledge or perceptual justification, we are often properly describable as *seeing that* the first is doing an injustice to the second and, indeed, as knowing this.

This point does not imply that seeing *an injustice* is intrinsically conceptual, even for someone who has the relevant concepts. But seeing *that* an injustice is

done *is* conceptual. By contrast, merely seeing a deed that constitutes an injustice is possible for a dog or a prelingual child lacking moral concepts. Once the child acquires moral concepts, of course, the same physical perception might immediately yield a moral conceptualization of the act or indeed moral knowledge thereof. Even before developing of moral concepts, however, the child may be disturbed at seeing an injustice in the kind of act in question, say giving medicine to a fevered shivering male but not to a female in the same condition.

It seems quite possible and, from a developmental point of view, important that the sense of unfittingness in such unjust action may occur prior to conceptualization: the disparity in treatment might, in the relevant way, disturb the child. This sense of unfittingness might be a factor in moral development (a speculation I cannot pursue here). It is certainly possible that in many children there is a perception of disparity that, together with the sense of its unfittingness, reflects a discriminative sensitivity to differential treatment of persons—especially when it is, in Aristotelian terms, dissimilar treatment of similars—and this sense of unfittingness puts such children in a good position to develop the concept of injustice. If this picture is correct, moral perception may precede moral concept-formation and indeed may lie on a normal developmental route to it.

Where there is perception, one would think it should make sense to speak of possible misperception and even hallucination. Nothing said here implies that what perceptually seems to have a property actually has it, nor need every perceptual or intuitive seeming regarding a proposition—a (conscious) perceptual or intuitive impression of its truth—yield belief of the proposition it supports. A preplanned vigorous exchange between friends could be misperceived as intimidation. This might lead to a false moral belief. One might also hallucinate a brutal stabbing and thereby have a moral experience that is quasi-perceptual.

Moreover, even where one sees a wrong, such as a lie, and so might believe the perceptually knowable proposition that A lied to B, one might not initially have a sense that the action is wrong or, especially, see *that* it is wrong. Here seeing a wrong done may not even be a moral perception and certainly need not yield a propositional perception that the deed is wrong. Consider a different example. We might see a man we view as domineering shake the hand of another, smaller man of lower social status before a meeting and notice a hard squeeze, with the result of redness in the other's hand. It might not seem to us until later that we have witnessed an intimidation, though we could have been more alert and seen at the time that the former was wrongfully intimidating the latter. Moral perceptual seemings, moreover, may or may not be partly emotional, as where indignation is an element in them.

One way to explain such phenomena is to say that initially, one does not see the squeezing of the hand *as* domineering. If we take seeing *as* to be essential for moral perception, it is essential to distinguish at least three cases. First, one may see the act (or other thing) as having a property, where this is *ascriptive* and not conceptual: roughly taking the thing to have the property in a way that reflects the information that it has that property but does not require conceptualizing that property as such (if at all). Perhaps seeing an approaching dog as dangerous can be like this for a very young child, yielding perceptually guided avoidance behavior but not depending on any conceptualization of danger as implying possible harm. Second, there is conceptual seeing *as*; this would be il-

illustrated by viewing the hand-squeezing under a description such as ‘intimidating’ (though no verbalization is required). Third, seeing *as* may be doxastic, as where I say, to someone who took the hand squeezing to be intimidation, that I saw it as—roughly, viewed it as—intended to express enthusiasm. Doxastic seeing *as* is of course not factive, and even seeing an actual, inexcusable wrong is compatible with mistakenly seeing it as, say, justified self-defense. If moral perception entails seeing *as* at all (say, a kind of taking *as*), then in the simplest cases it requires only ascriptive seeing *as* and neither conceptual nor doxastic seeing *as*. Perhaps one way to describe sensing morally is to call it a special case of ascriptive seeing *as*.

To recapitulate what has been said so far, on my view of perception, it is a kind of experiential information-bearing relation between the object perceived (which may be an action or other event) and the perceiver. I have not offered a full analysis of this perceptual relation but have said enough to indicate how, even if moral properties are not themselves causal, they can be perceptible. We perceive them by perceiving properties that ground them, which, in turn, may or may not be perceived in the basic way in which we perceive some properties other than by perceiving still others. But the dependence of moral perception on non-moral perception does not imply an inferential dependence of all moral belief or moral judgment on non-moral belief or non-moral judgment (a counterpart point also applies in the aesthetic domain). Indeed, although perceiving moral properties, as where we see an injustice, commonly evokes belief, it need not. When it does, it may do so in a way that grounds that belief in perception of the properties of (say) the unjust act in virtue of which it *is* unjust. This kind of grounding explains how a moral belief arising in perception can constitute perceptual knowledge and can do so on grounds that are publicly accessible and, though not a guarantee of ethical agreement, a basis for it.

### 3. The Phenomenological Problem

The phenomenology of perception poses challenges for even the simplest cases of moral perception. One concern is representationality. I have stressed that the sense in which a moral perception represents, say, wrongdoing, is not cartographic. But ‘represent’ can still mislead. Consider this worry: “What we are trying to achieve here is a conception of a state that is genuinely perceptual, but has a moral content. The phenomenal properties of outrage [say, outrage upon viewing a brutal stabbing], even when added to a perception of the base properties, don’t seem to generate a content of that sort” (Dancy 2010: 102).<sup>10</sup> A crucial issue here is what counts as “content.” In one sense, the percept represents the wrongdoing by virtue of representing the properties on which it is grounded: their presence a priori entails, by a kind of constitutive relation, the wrongdoing. But suppose content must be propositional. Then, on the natural assumption that one is acquainted with the content of one’s perception, some may take this propositional view of content to imply that the content must be believed or at least conceptualized by the perceiver. The demand for moral content taken to have this doxastic or conceptualistic implication is unreasonable: one can have a moral perception yet fail to believe or otherwise conceptualize a proposition that

<sup>10</sup> A detailed and helpful response to my preceding paper of the same title.

is the (or a) content appropriate to what is perceived, such as that an act like the discriminatory delivery of injections to children is unjust.

*The presentational aspect of perception*

The idea I have proposed to account for the representative element in moral perception is not the view that, in moral perception, a proposition is believed or even conceptualized by the perceiver. Rather, (morally) perceiving (say) an injustice yields an experiential sense of it that is integrated with—not merely added to, as Dancy apparently imagines—perception of the base properties for this injustice. The integration may or may not involve emotion, but it must go beyond the phenomenology of merely perceiving the moral phenomenon or of that merely conjoined with a moral belief concerning that phenomenon. The integration must also appropriately reflect a relation between the felt moral element, such as injustice, and the properties grounding that element, such as patently unequal treatment.

A moral perception has its own phenomenology. It is not “neutral” for the perceiver. As I have stressed, a *moral perception* is not merely a *perception of a moral phenomenon*, such as injustice. I have even left open what (if any) conceptual sophistication—as opposed to discriminative sensitivity—is needed for moral perception, but even if, for normal moral agents, forming a belief is typical in seeing such a blatant case of wrongdoing as the brutal stabbing, conceptualization is not required for every case of moral perception. (I will return to this matter in the final two sections).

As to the question of how my account reflects the presentational element in perception,<sup>11</sup> I have answered this concern in part by noting that representation need be neither cartographic nor doxastic nor even conceptual. This is not to deny that *having* moral concepts might be needed for the discriminative phenomenal responses crucial in moral perception or indeed for the moral sensibility required for having moral perceptions. But even if, as I leave open, a measure of moral *conceptuality* is needed *to be* a moral perceiver, it does not follow that moral *conceptualization* is needed for every instance of moral perception. A necessary condition for achieving an ability need not be present on every occasion of its exercise. In any case, it is not at all obvious that experiencing a *presentation* of a moral phenomenon entails having a cartographic or, especially, a conceptual *representation* of it, and I do not think that it does.

*Perception of emotion as an analogous case*

Perceptions of emotions in others are a good analogy to moral perception. Here it is helpful to compare moral perception with seeing an angry outburst that warrants comments like ‘He’s furious!’ Shall we say that the anger is not really perceived because it is seen through perceiving constitutive manifestations of it, such as redness of countenance, screaming, and puffing? Granted, these can be mimicked by a good actor; but a well-made manikin may similarly mimic a liv-

<sup>11</sup> Terence Cuneo has raised this problem (for both me and for Thomas Reid) in his critical commentary on *Moral Perception* given at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in 2014.

ing clothes model in a static pose. We should not conclude that living clothes models are never seen, or never seen directly. Why, then, may some injustices not be as perceptible as anger?

It is true that whereas anger is seen by its manifestations, moral wrongs are seen by seeing their grounds. But why should moral perception be conceived as limited to responses to effects rather than causes or grounds? More broadly, why should perception not be possible as a phenomenologically realized, often rich response to a variety of other reliable indicators or determinants of the perceived phenomenon? Let me develop this suggestion.

Suppose we think of perception as—in part—a kind of reception and processing of information that reaches one by a causal path from an information source to the mind, where the processing, as distinct from its resulting perceptual product in the mind, need not imply events in consciousness.<sup>12</sup> This conception certainly comports well with the role perception plays in providing everyday empirical knowledge of the natural world. On this conception, it should not matter whether the information impinging on the senses is determined by what is perceived, such as a flash of light, or, instead, by determiners or evidences of that. We can know a thing either by its effects that mark it or by its causes that guarantee it. Perceptual knowledge, like much other variety of routes by which the truth of its object is guaranteed.

#### 4. Perception and Inference

I have taken the perception of emotion to illustrate how perception is possible when its object is perceived not by directly seeing it but by perceiving properties reliably related to it. Such cases also bear on the objection that moral perception is at least tacitly inferential, an objection posed to my view (if with qualifications) by Pekka Väyrynen.<sup>13</sup> Imagine a context in which someone receives news of a setback due to someone else's surprising incompetence in their joint project. Then recall the example of seeing an angry outburst, which might be a response to such news. I have suggested that some moral phenomena, such as injustices, can be as perceptible as anger. More broadly, why should perception not be possible as a non-inferential response to a variety of other reliable indicators or determinants of the perceived phenomenon? The "function" of perception, one might plausibly suppose, is to enable us to navigate the world safely and skillfully.<sup>14</sup> Fulfilling that function leaves open many ways in which information needed for such navigation can reach the mind and guide the agent.

A further concern of some philosophers is how much we represent, and can thereby know, perceptually. Väyrynen refers, for instance, to a debate concern-

<sup>12</sup> For discussion of the sense in which perception is information processing, Dretske 1981 is a good source. Processing information is more than its mere reception; see Burge 2010, e.g. pp. 299-301, for discussion of the both notions and points concerning Dretske's view.

<sup>13</sup> In his critical commentary on *Moral Perception* at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association symposium on the book in 2014.

<sup>14</sup> For a view of perception that has some similarities to mine but is more "practically" oriented and provides a conception of the navigation metaphor, see Bengson (forthcoming). He conceives perception as "fundamentally practical" in the sense that it renders perceivers "poised for action."

ing whether natural kind properties, such as water, can be “perceptually represented” and, apparently thinking that moral perceptual kinds would be similar, writes:

By Audi's own lights, for my response to what Harman's hoodlums [who are seen burning a cat] are doing to count as a *moral* perception, it should be appropriately causally grounded in *both* perceiving the hoodlums setting the cat on fire *and* suitable background beliefs relating those properties to moral wrongness. So the relevant responses should be construed as “theory-laden,” in that what background beliefs one holds can causally affect what experiences one has.<sup>15</sup>

I have three points here. First, granting that “background beliefs” may be essential for *possessing* at least certain of the moral concepts that may be needed to *have* the moral perceptions in question, it does not follow that either a moral perception or a belief it elicits need be “causally grounded in” or—especially, *justificationally* based on, such beliefs. I doubt both claims. Second, I grant that the beliefs one holds can “causally affect” what experiences one has, but this is consistent with my first point. Third, supposing that in some way perception, including certain instances of moral perception, can be *conceptually* laden, this does not entail that perception is specifically “theory-laden” if that term implies either that it *inferentially* depends on some belief or conception or that perception is distorted (or even biased) as a result of a theory or view accepted by the perceiver.

One might now wonder whether my case “relies on a fairly narrow notion of inference, on which a belief counts as being based on inference only if it is consciously drawn from premises that are explicitly noted as premises or evidence.”<sup>16</sup> That notion is too narrow, and I do not rely on it. I have long held that a belief can be inferential, in the epistemic sense that it is *based on* another belief, even if the person does not episodically infer the propositional object of the former from that of the latter. A belief held *for* a reason, hence inferential in its basis, need not be a reasoned belief—one arrived at by reasoning. Moreover, my view is not that perceptual beliefs are non-inferential because they are not *elicited* by other beliefs, such as background beliefs, or by an episode of inference. Nor do I hold that perceptual beliefs must be *uninfluenced* by other beliefs. These are causal possibilities. My point is epistemic: perceptual beliefs are neither inferentially nor justificationally *based* on other beliefs and hence their *justification* does not rest on that of other beliefs.<sup>17</sup> This is important for understanding their normative status. It is also part of what supports their role in grounding the objectivity of ethics. Perceptual beliefs are in a sense ground-level. Some grounds are firmer than others, and some people find solid grounds more readily than others do, say in constructing a justification of their views. But perceptual grounds are normally at least objective in being intersubjectively available.

<sup>15</sup> Pekka Väyrynen, commentary on a draft of my “Moral Perception and Moral Knowledge,” Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, 2009, ms. p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Väyrynen, *op. cit.*, ms p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> This point does not entail that perceptual justification is indefeasible, or even that it cannot be *negatively* dependent, in the way defeasibility implies, on the perceiver's beliefs. This point is explained in chs. 8-9 of Audi 2010.

It is also essential to see here that a belief, and especially a perceptual one, need not arise from inference just because the believer *has* premises for it among the person's beliefs. When we do infer a proposition or engage in reasoning that leads to our inferring something from one or more premises, the inference takes us mentally along a path from what is represented by one or more psychological elements to what is represented by another such element.<sup>18</sup> It is true that we can traverse such a path without noticing it, but the mind also has its shortcuts. The territory may be familiar; our destination may be in plain view; and through the power of the imagination or some other informationally sensitive faculty we can sometimes go directly to places we would ordinarily have to reach by many steps. Perception is often like imagination in this and, without bypassing consciousness entirely, can take us from information acquired directly by vision to a belief that might, under studied conditions—or less favorable conditions—also have been reached by inference.

One source, then, of a tendency to posit inferences underlying the formation of perceptual belief is assimilating information processing that does not require inference to propositional processing that does. Another source of the tendency to posit inferences in perception is the resistance to foundationalism of one kind of another. On any plausible conception of a foundation, an inferential belief is not foundational, whereas perceptions and perceptual beliefs may be.

One manifestation of resistance to seeing the import of this moderate foundationalist conception is rejection (e.g. by Dancy) of the view that “the primary, or basic object of perceptual awareness must be things for the sensing of which no training, knowledge or experience is necessary” (Dancy 2010: 111). I agree that at least in that unqualified form this view is a mistake. But I do not hold it, nor need any moderate foundationalist. Moderate foundationalism in the theory of perception implies that in every perception there are some elements basic (so in a sense “foundational”) on the occasion; it does not imply that there are some elements basic in every perception. Moreover, in some perceptions, such as moral ones, the perceptible property—such as wrongness—is simply not accessible except through base elements that are partly constitutive of the property. It is surprising that Dancy says, e.g., that “one can perceive a resultant property, the dangerousness of the cliff ... without perceiving the features that make the cliff dangerous” (105). Surely one must see the steep slope or smooth, slippery-looking texture to *perceive* the dangerousness. Again, we have *constitutive* base properties. A perception of the dangerousness of a cliff, as opposed to one mere-

<sup>18</sup> This metaphorical statement does not entail that inference (in the process sense) is propositional and roughly equivalent to ‘reasoning’: a kind of mental tokening of an argument. A detailed statement of my broadly propositional view of inference is provided in chs. 5 and 7-8 of Audi 2006. Some philosophers and psychologists use ‘inference’ more broadly. See, e.g., Green 2010: “The inferences I speak of here will not in general consist of the derivation of one proposition from a set of others. Rather... they will more commonly take the form of a positioning of an object in egocentric space, an attribution of absolute and relative trajectories, and so forth” (49). On this view, inferences need not be drawn, or figure in consciousness as reasoning does, or be valid or invalid, or voluntary; indeed they need not constitute *doings* at all. I am not arguing that perception cannot involve inference if the term is used in a technical sense with the suggested breadth.

ly of a dangerous cliff, might be analogous to a moral perception of wrongdoing, as opposed to a perception that is merely of an action that is wrong.

## 5. Perception and Cognition

That perception is in some way entwined with cognition, at least in normal adults, is rarely questioned. But the intimacy of the relation in some cases, such as seeing that one person wronged another, does not entail that perception is intrinsically cognitive. How, in broad terms, should the relation between perception and cognition be conceived in the moral case?

### *Object perception, aesthetic perception, and moral seemings*

In exploring the relation between perception and cognition, we might recall the presentationality question. In considering this relation, Cuneo says, “When I perceive that the cup before me is black, the presentational character is presumably... explained by the cup and its blackness presenting itself to me... there would be a worrisome disanalogy between paradigm cases of perception, on the one hand, and moral perception...”<sup>19</sup>

The first thing to be said here is that Cuneo’s example is misleading: cups are physical objects. Perception of them can be, in my terms, cartographic and even pictorial: from one’s percepts (roughly, the internal, sensory elements in perception) one could reproduce their shape, extension, color, and so forth. Perceiving them is like perceiving visible base properties for moral phenomena such as stabbings. The problem is not that the perception is *objectual*, being of a “thing” rather than a property or proposition; the problem is that the thing is of the wrong kind to sustain the objection.

Second, a better analogy for moral perception is aesthetic perception, such as seeing delicacy in a drawing or gracefulness in a sculpture. Think of the delicacy of a finely inked drawing of a bird on a limb. We see its delicacy in good part by seeing, in a certain way, its lines, design, and coloration. Now think of the violent backstabbing of an old man in a dimly lit parking lot just as he opens his car’s door. We see the wrong in good part by seeing the violent stabbing. In the language of presentation, we might say the wrong presents itself to us, in a certain way, as the violent-stabbing-in-non-threatening-circumstances—a property that partly constitutes the wrong; and the full presentation of that wrong is this percept integrated with our disapprobative shock or distress as reflecting our moral sensibility.

A third point of disanalogy between the case of the coffee cup and that of a basic moral perception turns on the differing forms of the two cases. I have repeatedly stressed that simply perceiving an object does not entail having beliefs about it—as opposed to dispositions to form them. But the coffee cup example ignores this in a way that may obscure the kind of presentation I have sought to capture. I reject Cuneo’s unqualified view that “When I perceive the black coffee cup... I *have the impression* that there is a black coffee cup on my desk.” This view reflects a tendency of many philosophers to *propositionalize* perceptual ex-

<sup>19</sup> Terence Cuneo, commentary on *Moral Perception*, Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association (2014), ms p. 4.



perience. I would grant here that one has the impression *of* a black coffee cup; but—as where we are intently looking for something else—we may *not* have an accompanying belief *that* there is a cup. Note, moreover, that the propositional impression Cuneo reports is not even appropriate to the case in which (a) I see the cup, (b) it presents itself to me in a normal way, but (c) I *take* it to be a short vase. Yet that is a still clear case of my seeing the cup—even of clearly seeing it. Clarity of our vision of an object does not entail recognition of it.

In the moral case, we could speak of *perceptual moral seemings*, thus using a terminology familiar in epistemological literature. These are usually conceived as *propositional* but still not belief-entailing impressions that something is so, but I have left room for them to be *property impressions*, as with a sense of A's wronging B—say, where there is a subtle intimidation. It is quite open to me to say here (what is implicit in *Moral Perception*) that a moral phenomenon can present itself either non-propositionally as a phenomenally definite, normally valenced, seeming *of* wrongdoing or, less basically, as a propositional impression *that* (say) one person is wronging another. Even when such a propositional impression occurs, however, the subject need only be disposed to believe the proposition in question. The impression is conceptual, but not necessarily doxastic.

#### “Cognitive penetration”

Another aspect of the relation between perception and cognition should be considered here:

[C]ognitive penetration. . . [is] very roughly, the modification of perceptual representational content by states in the subject's cognitive system, where this can include, e.g., beliefs, desires, emotions, and intuitions. Nothing that Audi says in *Moral Perception* rules out this interpretation of the integration that distinguishes moral perception from mere perception of a moral phenomenon (Cowan 2014: 1170).<sup>20</sup>

In considering both ethics and aesthetics, I have presupposed some basic perceptual capacities, and it is true that I leave open the possibility of some kind of cognitive penetration in either moral or aesthetic perception. I see no serious difficulty presented by this openness, provided it is not taken to imply that moral perception *must* be conceptual or must entail some constituent belief. Consider the aesthetic case first.

Suppose that perception is subject to cognitive penetration, which, in aesthetics, has been described as the view that “cognitive states like beliefs or concepts about art causally influence experiences of art.” The influence is thought to be deep, in the sense that “what you know or think about art may affect how an artwork perceptually appears to you” (Stokes 2014: 27),<sup>21</sup> and this may be manifested in at least two ways: “expertise affects the supervenience base [presumably the grounding properties] of aesthetic properties by affecting low-level phenomenal content. Or, if one admits high-level content, expertise causes the

<sup>20</sup> Here he cites McPherson 2012. Cf. Siegel 2010, e.g. p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> See also Stokes forthcoming.

perceptual representation of high-level aesthetic properties” (Stokes 2014: 29).<sup>22</sup> Several questions should be distinguished here if we are to see whether the same kind of cognitive influence undermines my view of moral perception.<sup>23</sup>

First, is “expertise”—or moral sensitivity, to take the more common counterpart in ethics—exhausted by “what one knows or thinks about art” (or morality), or does it require familiarity with artworks at the level required for experiencing them in an aesthetically sensitive way? Second, does affecting the base involve changing the consequentiality relation or, instead, changing what base properties for an aesthetic property are perceived? Third, does the main question we must address concern causing or, by contrast, *enabling* the perception of “high-level aesthetic properties”? These questions should be taken in turn, and what we find will facilitate a further comparison between aesthetic and moral properties.

In both art and ethics, expertise is in part a matter of familiarity with the relevant phenomena and, related to this, of *knowing how*—how to appreciate, view, interpret, evaluate, and the like. Expertise is not purely cognitive. Given this fact, the evidences of expertise affecting experience of art and moral phenomena—even ordinary perceptual experience—are not in themselves evidences of purely cognitive effects. Suppose, however, that cognitive elements (or other intentional elements, including conative ones embodying or entailing desires) affect *what* elements in the scope of one’s sensory experience are actually perceived. Perhaps, e.g., I believe that melodic inversion is an element in some of Mozart’s piano works. I may then listen for it or simply be more likely to notice and respond to it when I hear these works. This suggests at least two possibilities. One is hearing something without noticing or, more important, responding to it. A second is not hearing something at all. Overcoming the first condition is a kind of perceptual enrichment; overcoming the second might be called perceptual enabling. In relation to either possibility, cognitive and other intentional elements may make one more aesthetically responsive. The parallel point apparently applies in the moral case. There might, to be sure, be a biasing influence of certain beliefs (or other intentional elements), but there need not be.

Consider also viewing a painting, where one knows one is viewing an original by Leonardo. This may intensify one’s attention to expected features, perhaps with the result of perceptual enrichment, say finer perceptual discrimination in a sense implying actually seeing more. But the aesthetic experience one then has is as such no different from what it would be without the cognitive “cause.” It might, however, differ—or at least its interpretation by the viewer might differ—in being biased by preoccupation with the thought of the master’s technique. The question of bias brings us to the matter of consequentiality of aesthetic (and moral properties) on other kinds of properties. At least in the moral case, these grounding properties are “natural” properties or at any rate non-moral ones, and they are at a lower level. Now compare the Leonardo case with one in which we observe someone we know is thoroughly immoral interacting with another person. This knowledge will affect our attention and our ex-

<sup>22</sup> Supervenience is a weaker relation than grounding (consequentiality) but the term is often used for the latter, as I assume it is here. An explanatory, determination relation is likely intended, but is not strictly speaking entailed even by strong supervenience.

<sup>23</sup> In this paragraph and the next few I draw on Audi 2014.

pectations regarding the person. We may then form beliefs we would not otherwise have formed, but our perception might not be different. Attention, however, is crucial in, for instance, *how much* we see. Thus, one possibility is that our knowledge of a person or thing results in our having more or sharper perceptions than we would otherwise have. This is a contingent matter. It appears, then, that cognitive penetration and similar external influences on perceptual experience may or may not imply that aesthetic or moral perception is *necessarily* biased by certain kinds of beliefs (perhaps not kinds held by everyone) or, as is well known, contingently and, one would hope, remedially biased.

Examples like the kind I have cited show that one's beliefs may, in certain cases, influence what one perceives, whether objects or properties. The examples suggest that, for some aesthetic or moral perceptions, certain experiences or indeed cognitions are needed to have those perceptions at all. But the examples do not show that moral perceptions *must* be influenced by one's beliefs or that moral perceptions are inferential. They also do not show that such perceptions are necessarily biased, in the sense that one would not, for instance, see wrongdoing if one did not *antecedently* believe that the kind of behavior one is viewing is wrong. Even if that should be true for some cases, however, if there can be perception and, through it, perceptual knowledge, of a moral proposition that confirms a general moral belief, the possibility of moral objectivity and of general moral knowledge receives support.

The support that the possibility of moral perception provides for the objectivity of ethics is perhaps clearest when a moral perception is a response to an a priori and, in some sense, basic ground of a moral property, such as a stabbing or a lie or, on the positive side, the bleeding of an injured child which yields a perception of a moral obligation to help. But suppose one perceives a wrong by hearing an insult of a friend. It may be only because one knows the conventions of the culture in which the insult is delivered that one is perceptually sensitive to the insult-property as a kind of injury or degradation and so, by virtue of a reliable connection between the insult-property and harm as a basic ground of prima facie wrongness, one can hear the wrong. Granted, one could in such a case infer that a wrong was done; but given a sensibility informed by relevant knowledge or experience, moral perception is possible and may provide non-inferential moral knowledge of wrongdoing. This seems to me a kind of *cognitive empowerment* affecting moral sensibility rather than a "cognitive penetration" of perception, but the latter phenomenon has been described with a considerable breadth that may imply its applicability to the former. In any case, perception may yield directly for some observers what is available to others only by inference.

Perception may also be a response to perceptible elements that are themselves manifestations of basic grounds of moral properties, such as injuries, rather than *instances* of basic grounds. Familiarity with conventions is not necessarily required to respond to these manifestations. The higher the level of the perception, the greater the number of layers it may embody, and conventions need not provide the connections that make possible a high-level perception. Seeing a forest fire approaching a child may yield a perception of obligation to rescue; the fire indicates a probability of a kind of suffering—an endangerment—but it is the projected suffering that, as intrinsically *reason-providing*, is a basic (or more basic) ground of the obligation of beneficence. If one saw someone lighting a cigarette near a haystack on which the child was playing, the per-

ception of obligation—for instance, sensing immediately the need to intervene—would likely be still higher level, being one remove further in discerned endangerment of the child than with the threatening forest fire; but it could have the same ultimate basis, and one could non-inferentially see that one must help.

## 6. Moral Perception, Realism, and Rationalism

Given that perception is factive, it would be at best implausible to hold that one can see, for instance, A's wrongdoing toward B, if there is no wrongdoing. To be sure, noncognitivists could argue that the locution 'S sees A's wrongdoing' simply expresses a higher-order moral attitude: a kind of negative attitude toward the behavior one takes S to see, which in turn S would "describe" by expressing a negative moral attitude through the sentence 'A wronged B'. With enough ingenuity, noncognitivism can be defended for the realm of moral perception as for other domains in which apparent moral facts are expressed. I make no attempt here to refute noncognitivism, but simply seek to provide a more plausible view. Moral realism, then, is presupposed by my theory.

Realism, however, need not be naturalistic, and I do not presuppose naturalism. My view is that moral properties are not natural properties, but if they should be, my overall theory of moral perception is easier, not more difficult, to defend. For if moral properties are natural, I doubt that it need even be argued that they have explanatory power or that moral perception is in part causally constituted. It is difficult to think of any natural properties of spatiotemporal entities, and especially of actions, that even appear to lack causal power. To reiterate part of my view of moral perception, I have argued that the "process" of morally perceiving something is causal in the way perception must be, but the causal work (insofar as it is done by properties) is apparently done by the properties (possibly tropes) on which moral properties are grounded, not by those properties themselves.

One might object to countenancing even the reality of non-causal properties—or at least non-causal properties that do not characterize abstract entities—on the ground that there are none among natural properties. It may well seem that it is only normative properties, for instance moral, aesthetic, and epistemic properties such as being justified, that are supposed to be real, non-natural, and non-causal. I do not see the objection as decisive even if it is true. But is it true? Consider shape, which is a natural property. A thing has shape not brutally, but on the basis of such causal properties as being spherical, which affects, for instance, its movement tendencies; yet shape itself does not seem causal. If it is, that is on the basis of its grounding properties, but if a property can be causal only on the basis of the causal power of its grounding properties, this would presumably hold for moral properties as well.

The case of shape in relation to particular shapes suggests the question whether we might perhaps say that wrongness, obligatoriness, and other normative properties are determinables. I am not arguing for this, though it is well worth pursuing. There is some analogy (as well as disanalogy) between moral properties and, say, shape and color; but my main point here is that there seem to be real properties even in the natural realm that do not have causal power yet figure in causal relations much as moral properties do. This does not require taking moral properties to have causal power or, if one does attribute it to them, conceiving them as determinables.

It is also true that my overall ethical theory incorporates rationalism, and I have appealed to the a priori and necessary connection between the grounds of moral properties and those properties themselves to explain the reliability of the process connecting, say, wrongdoing with the perception of it. But I would stress here that such a high level of reliability is not required for perception. Similarly, anger does not entail, much less self-evidently entail, the occurrence of the behavioral manifestations by which we know that someone else is angry, but this does not (for non-skeptics) prevent there being a reliable enough connection to make possible perceptual knowledge of anger. I deny, then, that “that the epistemic credentials of moral phenomenal responses [their ability to evidence, e.g., wrongdoing] are derivative of subject’s grasping ostensibly synthetic a priori entailments between moral properties and their non-moral grounds” (Cowan 2014: 1169). It is a determination relation that moral perception must appropriately respond to; the modality of the relation is not crucial for the response.

Suppose, for the sake of argument that there is only an empirical and contingent connection between moral grounding properties and the moral properties they ground. Why should this undermine my view that moral perception is non-inferential?<sup>24</sup> I see no good reason to claim that it would. But should we consider knowledge of anger inferential in the kinds of cases I have noted, in which the occasion on which perception occurs makes anger expectable and the person observed blows up with words and gestures appropriate to the occasion, say, a tipsy guest’s carelessly breaking a valuable platter? Surely not. Indeed, we recognize platters, vases, and even trees by properties such as color and shape that do not a priori entail their presence. We need not posit inference here, rather than simply grant that some perceptions occur on the basis of others that might be called (relatively) elementary constitutive perceptions.

## 7. Perception, Conception, and Perceptual Belief

It should be obvious that I do not take perception of objects and events to be intrinsically conceptual. This is not to deny that, for normal adults in many situations, perception of objects is not in general possible without conceptualizing the objects in question. I myself cannot see a china platter on a dining table in full view at dinner hour without conceiving it in some way that is appropriate to its character as dinnerware. Most of us could not see a man slapping his wife’s face upon her smiling at a deft and well-dressed waiter without conceiving of it as wrong. But the commonness of such perceptual patterns does not require concluding that perception can never be non-conceptual. It is indeed at best difficult to explain how conceptualization arises in human life in the first place if perception without it is impossible. Must we, for instance, posit innate concepts of platters, which are as visible to animals and to children just learning a language as they are to adults? And if the couple’s three-year-old child, seeing the incident, bursts into tears and blurts out ‘Daddy, don’t do that!’, must we deny that this could be an indication of the inchoate moral sensibility that presumably lays important groundwork for development of moral concepts?

It is a contingent matter how *conceptually entwined* a person’s perceptual experience is. I grant that for some of us moral perception tends to be entwined—

<sup>24</sup> This is suggested by Cowan (2014: 1169).

or *suffused*, one might say—with moral conceptions: for some of us, human life, or at least human relations, occur as if in a morally constituted framework. This is perhaps not unexpected in those who approach most human relations with standing moral concerns. Is justice being done? Is there an undertone of racism? Is the man condescending to the woman? But perception itself does not have to occur within the constraints created by such questions. There is clear sunlight as well as the colored light that puts us on guard against distortion. Speaking without metaphor, we might say that there are ways of progressively freeing ourselves of the necessity to bring what we see (hear, touch, etc.) under any concepts. Some ways are more successful than others, but the possibility confirms my view that conceptuality should not figure in the analysis of perception, however likely it is for certain persons or certain kinds of occasions of perception.

It is worth reiterating that the non-conceptuality of simple perception does nothing to undermine the view that perceptual belief—at least propositional belief—is conceptual. We cannot see (and thereby believe) *that* the platter shattered upon hitting the floor without a concept of a platter and of shattering. This point must be taken in relation to another: much of what we see—and certainly much of what philosophers find worth discussing in the visible domain—is such that we do in fact form perceptual beliefs about it. This helps to explain why philosophers so often, if only implicitly, take perception to be conceptual. Still, although perceptual beliefs are intrinsically conceptual, perception is not.

Let me apply these points to moral perception. It is appropriate that we be interested in and sensitive to moral phenomena in our lives. We should be indignant at the violent husband, pleased on seeing someone resist telling what would be a self-serving lie, and relieved when someone chairing a meeting makes a sincere-sounding apology after overlooking a hand raised to ask a question. These may all be cases of moral perception and so have an appropriate phenomenology, but they are likely to yield some cognition and, accordingly, to embody or, in some intimate way, yield conceptualization. For normal morally constituted adults, it would be rare that the kinds of perceptions just illustrated do not yield conceptualization, but I have given other examples in which the perception precedes conceptualization, as where a kind of activation of our sensibility yields a moral response before the perceiver recognizes what is seen under some moral concept. Another illustration is subtle intimidation, which seems a too frequently encountered case in which the perceptual sense of wrongdoing precedes the judgment that it is occurring. Another kind of case can occur with tiny children. Seeing cruelty by a babysitter may frighten a child and create a sense of something that should not be done. It is at least possible that fear and aversion can develop into a discriminative distress that represents a sense of wrongdoing. The child can be upset by the babysitter's causing a tearful outburst by slapping a sibling, in a way the child is not upset by a qualitatively similar outburst when the toddler is comparably pained and equally distressed by stubbing its toe. It is an empirical question just when and how such moral development occurs, but it is at least possible that a child's moral sensibility develops to some degree before—and paves the way for—acquisition of moral concepts.

## Conclusion

Moral perception is an element in much human experience. It is possible for any normal person but, like aesthetic experience, occurs less in some people than in others, even when they have highly similar perceptions of morally significant phenomena. It is not inferential, but facilitates inference; it is not doxastic, but creates, in those with sufficient understanding, dispositions to believe moral propositions that it justifies; and it is not necessarily biased by beliefs of perceivers even if it is also not immune to influence by their cognitions and other elements in their psychology. It may or may not yield emotion or be caused by emotion; it may or may not yield intuition or judgment or be caused by them; and it may or may not motivate action or be caused by action. But it often yields moral knowledge and thereby grounds an element of objectivity in ethics. It is not the only route to moral knowledge, but it is a route that different people can traverse in the search for mutual understanding and in the hope of agreement on the moral questions that are central for coexistence.<sup>25</sup>

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