

A limited defense of moral perception

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Abstract One popular reason for rejecting moral realism is the lack of a plausible epistemology that explains how we come to know moral facts. Recently, a number of philosophers have insisted that it is possible to have moral knowledge in a very straightforward way—by perception. However, there is a significant objection to the possibility of moral perception: it does not seem that we could have a perceptual experience that represents a moral property, but a necessary condition for coming to know that X is F by perception is the ability to have a perceptual experience that represents something as being F . Call this the ‘Representation Objection’ to moral perception. In this paper I argue that the Representation Objection to moral perception fails. Thus I offer a limited defense of moral perception.

Keywords Moral perception · Moral realism · Representation · Moral knowledge

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 Moral realism and moral epistemology

Let ‘moral realism’ be the view that moral facts are objective in roughly the same sense in which scientific facts are objective. One popular reason for rejecting moral

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realism is the lack of a plausible epistemology that explains how we come to know moral facts. And if we can't know that there are such facts, it makes little sense to bloat ontology by positing such facts. Thus many contemporary philosophers are moral anti-realists.

Moral realists have responded to this challenge by trying to explicate a reasonable moral epistemology. Virtually all of these attempts are paradigmatically *rationalistic* (in the modern sense of 'rational'), e.g. moral knowledge is innate, we know moral facts because they are self-evident, we know moral facts via intuition, etc. However, a few philosophers have responded to the anti-realist challenge with an *empirical* moral epistemology (Tolhurst 1990; McDowell 1998; Greco 2000; Watkins and Jolley 2002; Cuneo 2003; McGrath 2004; Prinz 2007). Such empirical accounts of moral knowledge are usually met with skepticism. How could one come to know moral facts by looking? How could moral perception be possible?

There are two significant objections to moral perception. First, it does not seem that we could have a perceptual experience that represents a moral property, but a necessary condition for coming to know that X is F by perception is the ability to have a perceptual experience that represents something as being F . A situation in which a person was lying would look just like a situation in which he was telling the truth—both would be represented the same way in a perceptual experience. Thus one can't determine whether a person is lying simply by looking. Call this the 'Representation Objection' to moral perception. Second, it does not seem that we could be in causal contact with moral properties, but perception requires a causal connection between the perceived and the perceiver. Thus moral perception is impossible. Call this the 'Causal Objection' to moral perception. I have responded to the Causal Objection elsewhere.¹ In this paper I argue that the Representation Objection to moral perception fails. Thus I offer a limited defense of moral perception.

2 Moral perception

It is important to get clear on the concepts of *moral experience* and *moral perception* before proceeding to a criticism of the view that humans are capable of moral perception. To respond to the moral anti-realist, one needs to show that humans are capable of moral knowledge. To do this in an empirical (as opposed to rational) fashion, one needs to show both that humans are capable of moral perception and that such perception—in at least some cases—gives rise to moral knowledge.

In order for any instance of perception to generate knowledge, the perception must be of 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

¹ See McBrayer (2009).

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.

What is at issue in these cases is what I shall call ‘perception as’ or perception *de dicto*.² We might say that all perception is perception *de re* in the sense that all perception is perception *of* some object or state of affairs or other, but perceptual knowledge requires more than mere perception *de re*. Perceptual knowledge requires perception *de dicto*.³ 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 (by perception) that *that’s* an oriole. This is why the distinction between perceiving and perceiving as is important. 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. From here on I will use ‘moral perception’ to mean ‘moral perception *de dicto*’.

We might think of moral perception as a species of moral experience. However, the term ‘moral experience’ is ambiguous. In one sense stretching back at least as far as Brentano in the late 19th 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 work is done by an emotional state.⁴ 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

² One might be tempted to resist conflating all *perception as* with all perception *de dicto* (thanks to Peter Markie for pressing this point). 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 capable of generating knowledge since I am seeing the man as being angry. 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’). That’s what is necessary for perception to give rise to perceptual knowledge, and it doesn’t matter what label we give such perception.

³ 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.

⁴ For a defense of the epistemic value of moral experiences in this sense, see Brentano (1969), DePaul (1988), Lemos (1989), and Tolhurst (1990).

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 sense 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 had a perceptual experience of the moral property in question.⁵

The moral epistemologies that provide an empirical response to moral anti-realism use the perceptual sense of ‘moral experience’. 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.⁶ 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. Obviously moral perception in this sense is not a source of *moral* knowledge.

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 sense 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ See Blum (1991), Nussbaum (1990); see Starkey (2006) for a more detailed taxonomy of moral perception.

avenue for moral knowledge because the subject 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, with '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. 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 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.

It is this strong form of moral perception that moral realists must defend if they want to sketch a plausible empirical moral epistemology. They must show that we can perceive that an object (or state of affairs) bears some moral property, or—to put it more bluntly—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'). Is such a thing possible?

3 Perceptual experience and perceptual representation

According to the Representation Objection, moral perception (in the restricted sense noted above) is not possible. But before I can present the Representation Objection in any detail, it is important to be clear about the relationship between *representation* and a *perceptual experience* and between *perceptual experience* and *perception*.

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 misremembering). 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. Most philosophers grant that perceptual experience is a necessary condition for

perception.⁷ 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.

The relationship between a perceptual experience and representation is also straightforward. A perceptual experience is a mental state, and at least some mental states represent things to be the case. For example, my belief that the sun is hot is a mental state that represents the proposition that the sun is hot. Similarly, my perceptual experience of the coffee mug's being on the table represents the proposition that the coffee mug is on the table. So what would a moral perceptual experience look like? Consider 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)

According to defenders of moral perception, in this kind of case the subject has a moral perceptual experience—a perceptual mental state that represents the proposition that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong.

With these distinctions made clear, it is possible to state the Representation Objection:

Representation Objection to Moral Perception

- (1) If moral perception is possible, then it is possible to have a perceptual experience of a moral property.
- (2) If it is possible to have a perceptual experience of a moral property, then it is possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a moral property.
- (3) It is not possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a moral property.
- (4) Therefore, moral perception is not possible.

If it is not possible for us to represent moral properties in perceptual mental states, then moral perception is impossible. And if moral perception is impossible, then the most promising empirical approach to moral epistemology fails, leaving us with either a rationalist account of moral knowledge or moral anti-realism.

4 No high order representation

Premise (3) is the crucial premise in the Representation Objection. Why think that it is true? There are basically two strategies in the literature for defending this

⁷ 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).

premise. In this section I explain and reject the first, and in the next I explain and reject the second.

One common defense of (3) is as follows:

No High Order Representation Argument

- (5) It is not possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a high order property.
- (6) All moral properties are high order properties.
- (3) Therefore, it is not possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a moral property

While we lack a precise distinction between high and low order properties, we do have an intuitive grasp of the distinction, and this is enough to make it reasonable to think that (6) 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 (5)?

(5) is defended by insisting that only low order properties can be represented in experience. There is a camp of philosophers who defend variations on this theme.⁸ 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 mental 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.⁹

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 track in optimal conditions....I conjecture that for perceptual experience, the

⁸ See Clark (2000), Dretske (1995), and Tye (1995).

⁹ 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).

observational features will include properties like being an edge, being a corner, being square, being red. (p. 141)¹⁰

An account like Tye's can be used to defend (5) 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 (5) 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. 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 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 (5) in the No High Order Representation argument.¹¹

¹⁰ By 'phenomenal content', Tye means any representational content that is nonconceptual.

¹¹ 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

Third, one can accept externalism about content and grant that the No High Order Representation Argument is sound, but insist that this poses no 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 .¹² This response is best sketched as a dilemma:

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

The defense of (8) 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.¹³ So, if externalists are right that the content of my perceptual experience is limited to low order properties, then perceptual knowledge is disconnected from what is

Footnote 11 continued

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?

¹² 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.

¹³ 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 'suppressed 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.

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 the thesis that at least some moral knowledge is perceptual.

The defense of (9) 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 (5). Thus the No High Order Representation argument is unsound. The Representation Objection still needs a defense for its crucial premise.

5 No moral looks

A different defense of (3) does not rely on denying that all high order properties are representable, but instead insists that there is something special about moral properties that prohibits a perceptual experience from representing a moral property. The most plausible way of motivating this objection is by insisting on a connection between perceptual representation and how things look (or sound, smell, etc.). 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. 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 defense of (3) the Looks Objection. The argument can be parsed very simply:

The Looks Objection

- (11) It is possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a moral property only if there is a way that moral properties look.
- (12) Moral properties don't look any certain way.
- (3) Therefore, it is not possible to have a perceptual mental state that represents a moral property.

According to the Looks Objection, perceptual experiences cannot represent moral properties unless there is a look associated with that property. Consider 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 (11). It is plausible that a perceptual experience represents various properties via phenomenology or looks. However, it is not at all obvious that (12) is true. The most straightforward way to assess the truth of (12) 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 (11) and (12) 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.¹⁴ 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 thought or belief that *X*

¹⁴ 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.

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.¹⁵ 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 (12) of the Looks Objection should be replaced with:

(12′) 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 (12′) 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.¹⁶ 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 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 (12) of the Looks Objection uses ‘looks’ in the comparative sense:

(12′′) 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:

¹⁵ See Harman (1977, p. 5).

¹⁶ For a defense of this counterfactual, see Sturgeon (1988).

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, (12'') 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 of ‘look’ (11) is false. On the present reading of ‘look’ and ‘normal’, premise (11) 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 (11) 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.¹⁷ But this doesn't show

¹⁷ 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.

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 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 the 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 mean 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 a *necessary* 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. Thus it seems that there is no ready-made defense of premise (12) in the Looks Objection. And this means that both of the prominent defenses for premise (3) in the Representation Objection fail.

6 Conclusion

I 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 this is compatible with the fact that it is possible in at least some cases for a subject to have a perceptual experience as if an action were wrong. The Representation Objection attempts to rule out this possibility. The point of this paper is that more work needs to be done to show that the Representation Objection is sound.

Thus the case presented here has been largely negative. I have not presented a positive case for the claim that moral properties can, in fact, be represented in perception. This project is much too large for the present paper. A defense of this claim would require the defense of a plausible methodology for determining the content of a perceptual experience and an application of this methodology to putative cases of moral perception. That is a project for another paper.

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