

Perceiving moral properties

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“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” (William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 14)

1. *What moral properties are*

They are the practical species of the broader genus of normative properties.

2. *What normative properties are*

Essentially reason-giving properties. (NB not all ERGPs give *decisive* reasons. The point about them is that they give reasons *in their own right*, as e.g. the property of greenness or being in Scotland does not.)

3. *What properties are*

Patterns in reality.

4. *What perception is*

Sensory perception is just sensory experience. Representational perception is passive simple pattern-recognition with a distinctive phenomenology. There can also be inference, which is where we work out what the pattern is, without this necessarily leading to our seeing the pattern even if it leads to our knowing that the pattern is there. Perception is epistemically basic: it gives us reasons for belief directly. If I perceive x as F, what gives me reason to believe that x is F is the way my belief is caused, not the way it is inferred from other beliefs.

5. *How we can know about properties*

To know about any sort of pattern is possible in either of the two ways just mentioned: by perception, and by inference. (I see there are four cows in the field, or I work it out by counting them; I see—in a colour photograph—that the Hibs player is wearing a green top, or I work it out from a black & white photo + the information that this is a picture of a Hibs player + my knowledge of Hibs’ playing colour; I feel that the loaf is hot, or I infer that it is hot from the fact that it has just come out of the oven. And so on.)

Perception is a quick route to the same epistemic destination as inference. It gets us there with a useful speed, directness, “givenness” (cp. the point about passivity in (4)), and with a vividness which grounds, and in favourable cases justifies, a sense of certainty.

6. *Which sorts of creatures perceive which sorts of property?*

What perceptual capacities any creature has is a function of its developmental history. Bats have evolved echolocation, a highly distinctive form of perception which as we all

know from reading Nagel seems likely to have a distinctive phenomenology quite unlike anything humans experience.

“Developmental” does not just mean “evolutionary”. Humans definitely, and a few other creatures possibly, have cultural histories as well as evolutionary ones. Cultures develop in ways that evolution does not programme for; we should always beware of thinking that what cannot be explained evolutionarily cannot (really) be explained. Human culture has developed capacities for representational perception that nothing in evolution made inevitable. E.g. reading, which demonstrates neatly my earlier point that representational perception is a matter of pattern-recognition. It also brings out nicely the distinction between inference and perception. To spell out the word CAT, letter by letter, and infer from what its letters are plus knowledge of the rules of phonetics that “cat” is what the inscription says, is not to *read* it. Reading it means looking at the array CAT and “just seeing” the pattern that it forms.

There is no upper limit on the complexity and sophistication of the properties that cultures can learn to perceive or otherwise detect—the patterns they can learn to pick up in reality. Mathematics, for instance, is a highly specialised way of inferring the existence of properties of an extremely *recherché* kind. And ethics, I want to suggest, involves a highly specialised capacity for perceiving the existence of the patterns that constitute moral properties.

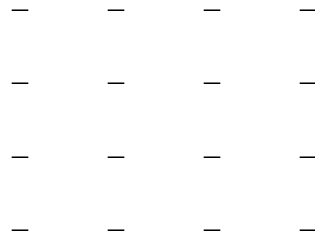
7. Moral perception

Moral properties, I’ve said, are essentially reason-giving properties, where the reasons they give are of the practical as opposed to the epistemic sort. How did we develop the capacity to perceive such things? Here the parallel with epistemic essentially reason-giving properties may help. Our evolutionary and cultural history makes this a platitude about us: *humans have an interest in knowledge and understanding*, just as bats have an interest in not bumping into things while flying at higher speed than their eyesight can deal with. The fact about bats’ interests sets the explanatory background against which it becomes unsurprising that bats should develop the perceptual capacity of echolocation. Likewise the fact about humans, that we have an interest in knowledge and understanding, sets the explanatory background against which it becomes unsurprising that we should develop the capacity to detect epistemic essentially reason-giving properties such as *truth, warrantedness, coherence, explanatoriness, logical consequence*, and the rest. So again, then, with moral essentially reason-giving properties. Platitudinously again: *humans have an interest in well-being/ eudaimonia*. It is, therefore, no great surprise that we should develop the capacity to detect essentially reason-giving properties of the practical sort. That capacity is just what we need to serve the relevant interest.

8. Realism on the cheap

Notice that I can say this without any kind of metaphysical extravagance. The thesis is that there are moral properties, that these properties are essentially reason-giving properties of the practical sort, and that we have the capacity to detect them. So far, that might sound extravagant. But recall what I say a property is: it is a pattern in reality.

Even the simplest sort of reality can ground patterns of great complexity. Suppose we begin from the idea that nothing exists except the following sixteen-dot matrix:



Even this minimal-seeming ontology does not exclude complexity. For if these sixteen dots exist, thus arranged, then it is immediately not the case that *only* these sixteen dots exist: there also exists every pattern that these sixteen dots can be correctly said to constitute. A capacity which perceived the matrix as four four-dot squares would be picking up a pattern that is genuinely there in the matrix. So would a capacity that perceived it as a four-dot square inside a twelve-dot square; and a capacity that perceived it as a twelve-dot cross against a four-dot background; and one that perceived it as three vertical or three horizontal corridors... and so on and so on, with no limit to the patterns that we can find in the diagram beyond those set by our ingenuity or imagination. Now, plausibly, the world is a good deal more complex—even on the simplest and most reductive reading of what counts as “the world”—than a sixteen-dot matrix. *A fortiori*, then, the world contains far more patterns than those that can be found in the sixteen-dot matrix. And these patterns, which constitute among other things the moral properties, are *really there in the world*; so the moral properties are really there in the world.

9. *With Dancy (and Plato) against Hume*

Hume famously writes (THN 3.1.1):

Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, so long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.

To which Jonathan Dancy retorts with a parody (*Moral Reasons* p.75):

Take any object allowed to be a table: This one, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call its being a table. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain shapes, sizes, textures, and colours of its component parts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. Its being a table entirely escapes you, so long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast,

and find a sentiment of respect-for-tableness, which arises in you, towards this object.

In Dancy's terms the moral of his parody is that Hume misses the possibility of "resultant properties". In my terms, the moral is not very different: it is that Hume misses the possibility that the phenomena he lists might constitute a pattern, and hence a property, which is as well named *vice* as the pattern of phenomena in Dancy's parody is named *table*.

A deep mistake is well displayed in this passage of Hume: the mistake, as we might call it, of classical empiricism. This is the mistake of giving a certain answer to the interesting and tricky general question about how we get from sensory to representational perception. (If indeed we do "get from" the one to the other at all; for the sake of argument, let us suppose for the moment that we do.) One classic account of the transition is canonically expressed by Locke and Hume (and later defended by Russell). This says that there's a basic level of sensory perception with which we all begin, and from which we get to the level of representational perception by inferential operations on the data given to us at the sensory level. (So with the table, for instance, we start with various sorts of simpler impression, and get our notion of the table by compounding these impressions.) If this account is meant—as it seems to be—as an explanation of how we get from sensory to representational perception which works by explaining the pattern-recognition that is involved in representational perception, then it is either empty or regressive. It is regressive if it assumes that sensory perception (in Hume's terms, the grasping of impressions) is itself a matter of pattern-recognition; for in this case, pattern-recognition has not been explained. It is empty if it assumes that sensory perception is not itself a matter of pattern-recognition; for then we still have the original situation that was supposedly puzzling—namely that, on the basis of "informationally bare" sensory perception, we move straight into "informationally loaded" representational perception just by coming to recognise patterns.

There is thus a dilemma for anyone who wishes, as the classical empiricists apparently did, to offer a reductive explanation of the pattern-recognition that I am taking to be central to representational perception. The moral is, perhaps, that one should just accept that there can be no reductive explanation of the capacity to recognise patterns. That, I believe, is the moral that Plato draws from his own statement of a similar dilemma, in the famous parts-wholes argument of *Theaetetus* 205d-e (my own translation):

So on the one hand, if the composite is a plurality of letters; and if it is a single whole, of which the letters are parts; and if we showed that "all the parts" means the same as "the whole"; then it follows that composites and elements will be knowable and expressible in an account *to exactly the same degree*... On the other hand, if the composite is one and without parts, then the composite just as much as the element will lack an account and be unknowable. The same cause—incompositeness—will create the same effects [viz., lack of an account and unknowability], both in the element and in the composite.

The empiricists or proto-empiricists whom Plato was opposing in the *Theaetetus* thought that they could explain how knowledge was perception, by explaining how cognitive representation could be reduced to sensory input. Plato replies that no amount of sensory input is sufficient, on its own, for any kind of cognitive representation at all, because there is no cognitive representation without the grasping of patterns—of what Plato calls Forms. If, on the other hand, sensory input is supposed already to involve cognitive representation, then these proto-empiricists are offering no *reduction*; for they grant Plato his key notion of cognition as pattern-recognition from the beginning.

10. Too cheap?

I admit the reality of all sorts of patterns. This, together with the claim that properties including moral properties are patterns, gets me the result that moral properties are real. Unfortunately it also gets me the result that indefinitely many other sorts of other patterns are real too. Relativism will be back if I can't show that there is something *special* about the pattern among all these other patterns that is particularly formed by moral properties. And relativism might seem to be getting back in anyway, given my claim that perceptual capacities develop with culture: don't different cultures develop different capacities?

In answer, recall what I said in (7). The *point* of developing capacities for detecting what we call the moral properties is given by humans' interest in *eudaimonia*. The patterns that are salient as the moral properties must, therefore, be the patterns that it is most useful and helpful for us to heed in pursuit of our interest in *eudaimonia*. Relativism will only be a serious threat if there is no fact of the matter about which patterns these are. And for the most part, there surely is a fact of the matter about this. (I say "for the most part" because I see no reason why there has to be a fact of the matter about it everywhere. In *some* respects, though surely not in all, different cultures' different moral categorisations may simply be different ways of pursuing that interest.)

Nor is there any need to pretend that we have already worked out in full which properties are the salient ones for an optimal normative ethics. It can be perfectly reasonable to see this as a question for cross-cultural negotiation.

10. Emotion and moral perception

There is more to be said about what moral perception is like, because in it the relations of cognition and phenomenology are rather different from those found in other sorts of representational perception. In reading, for instance, the phenomenology is distinctive, but "borrowed" from seeing. There isn't a phenomenology that differentiates reading from other sorts of sight-based representational perception. In the case of moral perception, there is "borrowed" phenomenology (borrowed from the various sense modalities); there is also what looks like a distinctive phenomenology, which comes from the fact that moral perception involves seeing things *under the aspect of mattering*. In paradigm cases, this means that moral perception is perception of value through the emotions. In the rest of this paper I shall explain and defend this claim.

11. Some examples of how emotion is moral perception

The examples show that emotion involves perceiving x as F, e.g. the puppy as pitiable, the lover as lovable, the tornado as threatening, and so on.

In such experiences, as many philosophers agree, we experience things under aspects of value.

That is, we experience them as instances of essentially reason-giving properties. (Remember, that doesn't have to mean that they give *decisive* reasons.)

12. Emotions as intentional attitudes

Emotions are not by definition beliefs (propositional attitudes). They can be (one way of holding) beliefs, but that's not what they are by definition. What they are by definition is (one way of holding) intentional attitudes: i.e. an emotion is seeing x as F rather than seeing that x is F.

This explains how we can have the emotion of seeing x as F while also having the belief that x is not F. That usefully explains our emotional responses to fiction, and shows how we can have "irrational emotions", i.e. emotions where the thought involved is one that we do not seriously wish to assert as a belief.

Classifying emotions as intentional attitudes also helps us to explain how children and animals can have emotions. It can be right to attribute the intentional attitude of seeing x as F where it isn't right to attribute a belief that x is F.

13. Emotional perception of value, akrasia, and internalism

There is more than one way of grasping a moral fact. One can grasp it by moral perception, seeing it under the aspect of mattering, or in focal cases perceiving the moral fact through emotions. One can also get hold of moral facts in other ways: most notably, by inferring them from other data. The inferential route to moral knowledge is as different from the experiential route as seeing that something is green is different from knowing that it must be green (even though it's in a black and white photograph) because it's a Hibs top.

When moral knowledge comes down the perceptual route, via an emotion that involves not just an intentional but a propositional attitude, and when no other sort of irrationality is present, then something like internalism is true about it: to have this knowledge is to be motivated. When moral knowledge comes down the inferential route, no such conclusion follows. So in one way internalism is true, and in another, externalism is true—because there are two sorts of moral knowledge. This explains how akrasia (acting against one's moral knowledge) is possible.

14. How all this answers the moral non-realist

The non-realist (paradigmatically Mackie) wants to know:

- A. What moral properties could possibly be.
- B. How we could possibly know about them.
- C. How there could be something that both represents and motivates, as moral facts are supposed to.

I have answered A by showing that moral properties are patterns that constitute essentially reason-giving properties of the practical sort. I have answered B by showing that we can develop capacities to grasp such properties, and in particular that we can

develop a capacity to perceive value through emotion. And I have answered C by showing that facts about practical normativity can both represent and motivate in just the same way as facts about epistemic normativity can; also, by showing that emotions both represent and motivate, and that emotions are perceptions of value.

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1. Moral properties are the practical species of the broader genus of normative properties.
2. Normative properties are essentially reason-giving properties (ERGPs). (NB not all ERGPs give decisive reasons.)
3. Properties are patterns in reality.
4. Sensory perception is just sensory experience. Representational perception is passive simple pattern-recognition with a distinctive phenomenology. (Contrast inference.) Perception is epistemically basic: my reason for perceptual belief is the cause of that belief.
5. We can know about properties by perception, or by inference. Perception is a quicker route to the same epistemic destination.
6. What perceptual capacities any creature has is a function of its developmental history. “Developmental” does not just mean “evolutionary”; human culture has developed capacities for representational perception that nothing in evolution programmed. E.g. reading, mathematics, and—I propose—ethics.
7. How did we develop the capacity to perceive moral properties? Compare epistemic ERGPs. Humans have an interest in knowledge and understanding, just as bats have an interest in not bumping into things. No surprise that bats develop echolocation, or that humans develop the capacity to detect epistemic ERGPs—truth, warrantedness, coherence, explanatoriness, logical consequence, etc. Likewise with moral ERGPs. Humans have an interest in eudaimonia. So no surprise that we develop the capacity to perceive practical ERGPs.
8. *Realism on the cheap*: Even the simplest reality can ground patterns of great complexity:

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9. Hume THN 3.1.1: Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, so long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.

Dancy *Moral Reasons* p.75: “Take any object allowed to be a table: This one, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call its being a table. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain shapes, sizes, textures, and colours of its component parts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. Its being a table entirely escapes you, so long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of respect-for-tableness, which arises in you, towards this object.”

A deeper mistake in Hume: the idea that there's a basic level of sensory perception with which we all begin, and from which we get to the level of representational perception by inferential operations on the data given to us at the sensory level. Refuted by Plato, *Theaetetus* 205d-e:

“So on the one hand, if the composite is a plurality of letters; and if it is a single whole, of which the letters are parts; and if we showed that “all the parts” means the same as “the whole”; then it follows that composites and elements will be knowable and expressible in an account *to exactly the same degree*... On the other hand, if the composite is one and without parts, then the composite just as much as the element will lack an account and be unknowable. The same cause—incompositeness—will create the same effects [viz., lack of an account and unknowability], both in the element and in the composite.”

10. Realism too cheap? I admit the reality of all sorts of patterns. This gets me the result that moral properties are real. But also the result that indefinitely many other sorts of other patterns are real too. What is *special* about the pattern that is formed by moral properties? And don't different cultures develop different capacities? *Answer:* The point of developing capacities for detecting the moral properties is given by humans' interest in *eudaimonia*. The patterns that are salient as the moral properties must, therefore, be the patterns that it is most useful and helpful for us to heed in pursuit of our interest in *eudaimonia*. Relativism will only be a serious threat if there is no fact of the matter about which patterns these are.

11. Emotion and moral perception. Moral perception has a phenomenology of its own: it involves seeing things *under the aspect of mattering*. In paradigm cases, this means that moral perception is perception of value through the emotions. *12. Examples.*

13. Emotions as intentional attitudes

Emotions are not by definition beliefs (propositional attitudes). They are intentional attitudes: i.e. an emotion is seeing x as F rather than seeing that x is F. This explains problems about fiction, irrational emotions, and children and animals. Also *14. Akrasia and internalism.*

15. How all this answers the moral non-realist

The non-realist (paradigmatically Mackie) wants to know:

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Stirling, 19.11.06

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