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Book Review: Moral Perception

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The issue of which instances of religious faith, if any, satisfy these two conditions is beyond the scope of Buchak's paper. It seems likely to me that some will, especially ones that have modest propositional objects and that are expressed by low cost actions. Less likely to pass muster, however, are instances of great faith, such as having faith that the Christian God exists and expressing that faith by an act of martyrdom.

It is worth mentioning in closing, if this is not already obvious, that many of the essays in this volume attempt to address controversial issues in philosophy of religion by first addressing controversial issues in confirmation theory or formal epistemology or decision theory. In some cases, the result is that the papers don't get very far on the actual topics in philosophy of religion that allegedly motivate them. I don't mention this as a criticism of the volume or of any of its essays, but I do hope that some of the talented authors of these essays regard their work here as initiating a research program in the philosophy of religion instead of terminating one.¹

Moral Perception, by Robert Audi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. 194 pages. \$35 (cloth).

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In this relatively compact volume, Robert Audi offers a substantive analytical treatment of moral perception, and situates it within a broader epistemological intuitionism that he has developed elsewhere. Audi's primary thesis is that we can perceive moral properties, and that this capacity for moral perception plays a major role in moral judgment and knowledge. On Audi's view, by establishing a capacity for moral perception, he has also established the possibility of both moral objectivity and the rational resolution of moral disagreement (4).

The first of the book's two sections lays out Audi's conception of moral perception and the primary arguments in its favor. Audi's view is that we perceive moral properties by perceiving their physical "base properties," i.e., the physical properties on which moral properties are "consequential" (39). Thus, when we perceive someone cheating on an exam, we do not directly perceive the moral property of injustice in the way that we directly perceive, say, the property of roundness. Instead, we perceive injustice in virtue of having perceived the ordinary physical properties that instantiate cheating in this case. Audi's view thus aims to show how moral perception is possible while avoiding an ambitious form of moral naturalism, i.e., the view that moral properties are part of the natural order in just the same way that tables, chairs, and other familiar objects of perception are. Audi

¹I am very grateful to my students, James Elliott, Jonathan Fuqua, and Mark Satta, for helping me with this review.

holds that moral properties are “perceptible” without being “perceptual” (35). Perceptual properties are those like color, shape, and texture, and so on, which are standard aspects of sense experience. “Perceptible” properties, however, are those that we perceive only through the perceptual base properties that realize them. Audi thus holds that his view naturalizes morality in at least one limited sense: we can learn about moral properties via the natural properties that realize them, natural properties which are themselves part of the natural causal order (56).

The primary philosophical opponent of Audi’s view is some form of “intellectualism,” which holds that ostensible instances of moral perception in fact involve either conscious or sub-conscious processes of inference or reasoning (3). On this view, one cannot perceive moral properties. Instead, one merely perceives events that possess moral properties (without representing the moral properties themselves in perception), and then makes inferences which result in the attribution of moral properties to the events one has perceived.

So why should we side with Audi against the intellectualists? Audi’s core argument is, in effect, that intellectualism about moral phenomena commits us to implausible views about the perception of various non-moral phenomena. Audi proceeds here mainly by extrapolating from examples. When we perceive anger, for example, we do so in virtue of having perceived the various facial features that are indicative of anger. But we have indeed perceived anger itself because, Audi suggests, our attribution of anger is not mediated by some inferential process. Rather, it is represented in our perceptual experience itself (59). If we deny that moral perception is possible because moral properties are only perceptible via base properties, then we seem committed to holding that anger and a wide range of other everyday phenomena are not perceptible either.

Given the importance of this point in the argument, it would have been helpful to hear something about the empirical side of things. Certainly, Audi is right that we talk about the perception of anger much in the same way, indeed, that we talk about “seeing” injustice. But whether or not our attributions of anger and injustice are mediated by inference seems to be susceptible of empirical confirmation. This reflects a more general feature of the book: Audi’s methodological orientation is to operate primarily within the bounds of a traditional philosophical approach, proceeding through conceptual argument, careful distinctions, and illustrative examples. Audi’s references are almost exclusively to other philosophers, and those hoping for significant engagement with empirical psychology or cognitive science will be disappointed.

The second half of the book situates the account of moral perception within a more general epistemological framework, focusing in particular on connections to intuition and emotion. Here, Audi’s discussion is particularly illuminating, unearthing a range of interesting distinctions and parallels among these three faculties, and showing how they might plausibly serve as the basis for knowledge. It is difficult to do justice to Audi’s

multi-faceted discussion here, but emotion, perception, and intuition are united in his view by the way in which they can provide grounds for knowledge without inferential mediation. Audi holds that the prospect of moral knowledge without inference has a kind of particularist implication for moral epistemology (though he does not himself characterize his view as particularist): some aspects of moral knowledge can be acquired without applying or even believing general moral principles (100). And the general epistemological framework here is reliabilist: our intuitive, emotional, and perceptual faculties provide justificatory grounds insofar as they are reliable routes to true belief, even if they operate non-inferentially (63). Along the way, Audi offers a fascinating discussion of the parallels between aesthetic and ethical judgment, and also makes a foray into the substantial epistemological debate about peer disagreement.

Audi does not aim to give knock-down arguments for his views. Instead, the strategy is to make the prospect of moral perception, and moral knowledge based upon it, seem viable and attractive. Audi makes moral perception at least a plausible component of our epistemic landscape, in part because he is careful to qualify his argument at important junctures: moral knowledge can be but is not always perceptual, perception can be but is not always propositional, etc. Audi nonetheless makes some very ambitious claims about the implications of his argument, and the book would have benefited from further defense and development of these. I turn now to raising some critical questions about the book.

Recall that, on Audi's view, moral perception makes possible both moral objectivity and the rational resolution of moral disagreement. I see at least two distinct kinds of problems with these claims in the context of Audi's argument. The first problem concerns the significance of the intellectualist/non-intellectualist divide for these matters. Suppose we imagine an intellectualist who rejects the possibility of moral perception. She holds that moral knowledge is always gained by applying moral principles to the observation of non-moral properties, and then drawing an inference. What advantage is gained—so far as objectivity and rational dispute resolution are concerned—if this extra inferential process is not required for moral judgment? One possible answer to this question centers on the general convergence of moral perception across otherwise heterogeneous moral agents. Perhaps individuals living in rural Somalia and those living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan might, when confronted with some pointless act of cruelty, both perceive moral wrongness. Perhaps this kind of convergence occurs across a sufficiently broad range of disparate moral phenomena such that it provides a substantial basis for rational dispute resolution. Audi sometimes seems to suggest this sort of point, as when he speculates, for example, that one might have an unavoidable intuition "that someone is doing a wrong if one sees the person drop wet banana peels at the top of a stone staircase in a public square" (99).

But even if we suppose that we are prone to these sorts of immediate and compelling judgments, why does it matter whether the judgments are derived from some inferential process? *Prima facie*, it seems just as likely that we would be compelled to draw certain kinds of sub-conscious inferences as it is that we would be compelled to believe certain things without such inferences. What is the significant disadvantage of intellectualism here?

A second and related problem concerning Audi's claims about the relationship between moral perception and moral objectivity/rational dispute resolution is that Audi doesn't give any compelling evidence that moral perception is in fact a reliable or convergent faculty. There is no need to rehearse here familiar worries about cross-cultural (and even intra-cultural) divergence regarding moral judgments, and Audi himself does not deny the validity of these concerns. In a lengthy discussion on peer disagreement, Audi aims to show that moral disagreement can at least plausibly be explained by reference to rational differences among disputants (69–82). But that does not suffice to show that moral perception is likely to help us resolve our disagreements, particularly if the content of moral perception is thoroughly penetrated by moral background beliefs. Perception serves as an objective source of knowledge in the case of the physical world because at least some aspects of our perceptions of the physical world are relatively stable across diverse theoretical presuppositions. There are at least very significant doubts about this in the moral case, and Audi doesn't offer a substantial argument to diminish the credence of such doubts.

A related problem is that, even if our moral perceptions were stable across diverse background beliefs, we might simply be in the grips of a common delusion, as in the case of widespread convergence on racist, sexist, and anti-homosexual beliefs at various points in history. Does moral perception provide an independent source of evidence with which to check our moral beliefs? Or does it merely tend to flatter whatever our preconceptions happen to be? It is certainly possible that moral perception might serve as a kind of epistemic counterweight to our moral preconceptions, and Audi's argument goes a long way in articulating the nuances of such a possibility. But he does not offer much evidence to make this possibility seem probable. Nor does he venture any specific account of the conditions that tend to support perceptual reliability in the moral case.

Though the book's arguments at some points do not go as far as one might hope, it nonetheless offers a richly nuanced picture of an important epistemological phenomenon. It also succeeds in connecting that phenomenon in compelling and creative ways to important views on the epistemic status of intuitions and the emotions. It is written with characteristic analytical care and is full of illuminating examples. I strongly recommend this volume to anyone interested in these issues and in moral epistemology more generally.