

Moral Perception

Andrew Cullison

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I defend the view that we can have perceptual moral knowledge. First, I motivate the moral perception view by drawing on some examples involving perceptual knowledge of complex non-moral properties. I argue that we have little reason to think that perception of moral properties couldn't operate in much the same way that our perception of these complex non-moral properties operates. I then defend the moral perception view from two challenging objections that have yet to be adequately addressed. The first objection is that the moral perception view has implausible commitments concerning the *morally blind*, people who would claim not to perceive wrongness. The second objection is that the moral perception view is not really compatible with a wide range of the main candidate moral theories. I argue that the moral empiricist has plausible responses to both of these objections. I then address three residual concerns that my defense raises.

Call the view that some moral knowledge is basic empirical knowledge the *moral perception* view. With the exception of a few recent defenses, it seems that the view is largely unpopular and most would regard the view as incredibly implausible.¹ In the first section of this paper, I motivate the moral perception view. In the next two sections, I defend the view from two challenging objections. In the last three sections, I address issues that my defense raises.

I. Motivating the Moral Perception View

The view that we can perceive moral properties seems counterintuitive; however, it should seem less problematic once we consider the wide range of complex properties that we can have knowledge of via perception.² Sarah McGrath says something similar,

Many people think that on the face of it, this view is not at all plausible. They think that it is implausible that we can *perceive* that, for example, torturing a cat is wrong. But [the view that we have some moral knowledge by perceiving

moral facts] does not say that there is some dedicated organ of moral perception, or that moral perception is just like perceiving colors and shapes, or that the blind can't perceive moral facts, or that we can perceive moral facts without a lot of conceptual sophistication. We can perceive that other people are in pain, that it's time to water the plants, or that Fred told a joke. The proponent of [the view in question] can say that moral perception is like that.³

The idea is that moral properties are relevantly similar to other complex non-moral properties that we clearly do have perceptual knowledge of. Vintners can distinguish between different kinds of dry red wine.⁴ A park ranger can see that a particular tree is a silver maple as opposed to a sugar maple. Chicken sexers can see just by looking whether a particular chick is male or female. I can identify a friend from a distance. I can see that my fiancé is sad, or worried. Some people can discern whether persons in photographs are happy or sad.⁵ These properties are all complex in that they depend on instantiations of other properties, and might be characterized as reducible to these other properties. In some sense these complex properties are typically not the sorts of properties that are directly observable the way a simpler property like redness might be. If we perceive these properties, it is a kind of mediated perception. We perceive them in virtue of perceiving some directly observable, simpler properties. In all of the above cases, it seems reasonable to suppose that the persons are coming into the right sort of causal contact with a very complex property so that they qualify as perceiving an instance of that property.⁶

There is little reason not to extend this to moral properties.⁷ There are a number of complex properties such that coming into the right sort of causal contact with them is generally regarded as sufficient for perceiving those properties. I aim to defend that the same is true of some moral properties. In the remainder of this paper, I will defend this view from two major objections.

II. Pat, the Morally Blind Graduate Student

One difficulty for the view that we can have perceptual knowledge of moral properties or facts has recently been discussed by David Copp.⁸ Proponents of the objection allege that the moral empiricist must say something counterintuitive about persons who do not seem to *see* moral facts. It is easiest to think about the objection that Copp considers if we have an illustrative example before us.

Pat the Morally Blind Grad Student

Pat and Chris are walking home from school. As they round a corner they see some of their undergraduate students pour gasoline on a cat and light it on fire. Chris screams, "I can't believe they're doing that! That's so wrong!" Pat asks, "What do you mean?" Chris replies "Don't you see it? Can't you see that it's wrong?" Pat shrugs his shoulders.

It is possible that someone has the same visual field as someone who apprehends that the burning is wrong but fails to judge that it was wrong. In the case above Pat and Chris have the same visual experience, but Pat doesn't see that the action is wrong. The moral perception view seems committed to saying that Pat has defective perceptual faculties. He has all the same visual input as Chris, but apparently doesn't perceive the property, so it seems that according to the view under consideration Pat must have defective perceptual faculties. Before we consider replies to this objection, it would be good to have a more precise construction of the argument.

The Morally Blind Objection

- (1) If we can perceive moral properties, then Pat fails to perceive the property of wrongness and Chris does not fail to perceive the property of wrongness.
- (2) If Pat fails to perceive the property of wrongness and Chris does not fail to perceive the property of wrongness, then Pat's perceptual faculties are defective.
- (3) Pat's perceptual faculties are not defective.
- (4) Therefore, we cannot perceive moral properties.

Premise (1) is supposed to seem reasonable because it seems that if we can perceive moral properties, then (however moral perception works) Chris meets the conditions for perceiving the property, but Pat does not. After all Chris readily acknowledges the presence of the property and Pat doesn't.

Premise (2) also seems reasonable. What else could explain the fact that Pat fails to perceive the properties that Chris perceives other than the fact that Pat must lack something that Chris does not lack? Pat's missing something. His cognitive equipment must be deficient in a way that Chris' cognitive equipment isn't.

Premise (3) is also, initially, very reasonable. Pat's perceptual faculties are functioning just fine. He really does see everything that Chris sees. A defender of premise (3) might argue that even if we think that there is something wrong with Pat, it would be a mistake to say that Pat's deficiency lies in his perceptual faculties. Pat's deficiency lies somewhere else.

The objection is plausible, and it's a serious challenge to the moral perception view. However, there are a few problems. First, premise (1) is questionable. It's not clear that Pat fails to perceive the property of wrongness. He fails to form the

judgment that the action is wrong. That seems pretty clear. But it is open to say that Pat comes into the right sort of causal contact with the property of wrongness to have a perceptual experience of the property. He's not thinking about that property in the moral way that Chris is thinking about it, but he is still having a perceptual experience of that property.

Perhaps this could be illustrated more clearly with more details added to the case. Suppose that the property that being-wrong is identical to is being-such-that-it-does-not-have-best-consequences. Suppose that this complex property is correlated with other directly observable properties that Pat can observe.⁹ One could say that since Pat observes all of these other directly observable properties that he really does perceive the property being-such-that-it-does-not-have-best-consequences. That Pat fails to assent to the sentence 'This action is wrong' is not sufficient to think that he does not perceive the property. He just doesn't think about that property in the same way that Chris does. He has a kind of conceptual or recognitional failure, but he does perceive the property.

We could say something similar in the case of chicken sexers. Suppose Chris is really good at identifying whether a particular chick is male or female. Presumably this is because Chris is sensitive to some observable properties *and* has a recognitional capacity to process what he observes. Even if Pat cannot reliably form beliefs about the sex of a particular chick, we might say that there is a sense in which he does perceive that a particular chick is male. The exact same properties are present in his visual field as are present in Chris' visual field. What Pat lacks is a kind of recognitional awareness, and so he cannot form the requisite beliefs reliably.

A stronger objection to the above argument, however, begins by closely examining how best to understand its use of the phrase *perceptual faculties*. A very narrow reading of the term would have perceptual faculties include only those faculties that yield raw sensory data. This narrow reading makes premise (3) true. Pat and Chris have the same raw sensory data. Chris' perceptual faculties are not defective and so neither are Pat's perceptual faculties.

However, the moral empiricist could say that if we interpret *perceptual faculties* as only those faculties that yield raw sensory data, then (2) is false. The moral empiricist can hold that more goes into a successful perception of a moral property than merely having that property present in your visual field. A successful perception of a property requires not just the raw data, but some recognitional capacity to process the raw data. McGrath gestures at this when she says that "[the view that we have some moral knowledge by perceiving moral facts] does not say that ...we can perceive moral facts without a lot of conceptual sophistication."¹⁰ A narrow reading of *perceptual faculties*, makes premise (2) less plausible.

The objector could modify what is meant by *perceptual faculties* to accommodate this. The objector could hold that the meaning *perceptual faculties* includes whatever mechanisms are required to process raw visual input and draw out the concepts that are represented in that raw input. If we include these processes, (2) may be true, but now (3) is probably false. Our intuitions that there is nothing wrong with Pat's perceptual faculties are most likely motivated by our intuitions that his raw visual data is the same as Chris', but that's not what Pat's perceptual faculties are on this latter definition of *perceptual faculties*. By *perceptual faculty* we mean to include

(in addition to faculties that yield raw sensory data) some faculties that process the raw data. Once we start including faculties other than the faculties that yield raw sensory data as part of our perceptual faculties, the moral empiricist can resist premise (3) and say that Pat's perceptual faculties are defective.¹¹

It's helpful to compare this case to a non-moral case. Think about complex properties like being-a-sugar-maple. Presumably a trained expert can *see* the property being a sugar maple, and someone else with the same visual field could fail to *see* that property – if we have this broad understanding of perception.

In the end, I think the Morally Blind Objection equivocates on two senses of *perceptual faculty*. If what we meant by *perceptual faculty* is merely raw input faculties, then while it is implausible to suppose that Pat's faculties are broken, it is also plausible to suppose that more than a perceptual faculty is required to perceive some properties. If we broaden *perceptual faculty* to include these other necessary components, then it is not implausible to suppose on that broader understanding of *perceptual faculty* that Pat's faculty is defective, or at least not working in the same way that Chris' is working.

III. Moral Perception and the Correct Moral Theory

I have argued that there is no special obstacle to thinking that we cannot perceive moral properties in much the same way that we can perceive other complex, physical, causally efficacious properties. However, we might start to think there are obstacles when we start thinking about particular moral theories that analyze the moral properties.

For example, suppose act consequentialism is true. Moral properties would supervene on a complex arrangement of properties involving future facts and arrangements of properties. Future instantiations of relations from now until the end of time are involved in an action's overall consequences. Do we really perceive a property that is that complex? Is the thesis that we perceive moral properties committed to denying act consequentialism? If so, which moral theories *are* compatible with moral empiricism? In this section, I will consider four candidate moral theories. I will argue that the view that we have basic perceptual knowledge of moral facts is compatible with all four.

Some of the earlier cases involving perception of complex non-moral properties support the idea that someone could perceive some property Q in virtue of directly perceiving some other property P such that P was present because of property Q and regularly correlated with the presence of Q.

I think it is very difficult to specify precisely what the connection between Q and P needs to be in order for someone to perceive Q in virtue of directly perceiving P. Nevertheless, I think this phenomenon regularly occurs in non-moral cases. There is a sense in which we don't directly perceive chair-ness. We directly perceive some simpler properties arranged in a particular way, and in virtue of directly perceiving these simpler properties we perceive chair-ness. In almost all of the cases at the beginning of this chapter where persons perceived complex natural properties, the direct perception is of some simpler properties. The complex natural properties are simply correlated in some way to the simpler properties. We perceive these complex properties in virtue of coming into causal contact with the simpler properties.¹²

Even though it's difficult to articulate how the above instances of perceptual knowledge work or what the relationship is between these simpler properties and the complex properties we see in virtue of seeing these simpler properties, I think it's reasonably clear that there are instances of this kind of perceptual knowledge. I will have more to say about this relation in the next section, but for now let's return to the worry that the possibility of moral perception depends on which moral theory is true. I will argue that moral perception is compatible with four popular kinds of moral theory.

Act Consequentialism

Act consequentialism is the view that an act is morally right if, and only if, it has the best consequences from among its alternatives. If act consequentialism is true, then each moral property would be identical to a really complex property involving future arrangements of properties. Future instantiations of relations from now until the end of time are involved in an action's overall consequences. One might argue that we cannot perceive this complex property because there is so much involved in its instantiation that we don't see. Whether or not an act has the best consequences depends on an event that takes a very long time to unfold, and we only come into contact with a very small portion of that event. If we only come into to contact with such a small portion of the event, it doesn't seem that we could actually perceive that event or that the action has the best consequences.¹³

This objection assumes that there is a problem with perceiving an event if you only come into causal contact with a small proper part of that event. However, we perceive a lot of things in virtue of only seeing a small part of them; the moon, other

people, snakes in the grass, lines for the roller coaster. We can extend this to the property of having-the-best-consequences and say that sometimes when an act has the best consequences people see enough of the event that having-the-best-consequences is correlated with to see the instantiation of the whole property. Suppose I see some kids light a cat on fire. Suppose that it's true that this is wrong, and that it's wrong because it fails to maximize utility. The action I perceive instantiates the property being-wrong, and I only perceive a small part of the realization of that property. But it's open to the moral empiricist to say that I have seen enough of the event to perceive that it doesn't have the best consequences.

If I see Bob torture Joe and Bob declares that the torture for his (Bob's) own pleasure, I have excellent reasons based on what I saw from my limited perspective to believe that this will not have the best overall consequences. I only saw a small part of what that person did, but that seems to be enough to have good reasons to believe that the person had better options. In this case, I have come into causal contact with some properties that are reliable indicators that the property failing-to-have-the-best-consequences has been instantiated. So it's not at all clear that this fails to be a perception of the property.¹⁴

This does not resolve all the difficulties of attempting to reconcile moral empiricism with act consequentialism. There are some difficult issues that remain. One is a question of how much of a part of something do we need to perceive in order to perceive the whole thing. For example, when I look at my desk table I perceive a part of the universe. It doesn't seem like I see the universe in virtue of seeing that

small part of the universe. A line must be drawn somewhere, and I'm not sure where to draw it.

Even if one is not convinced that the property having-the-best-consequences falls safely on the moral empiricist's side of the line, it is at least not obvious that it must fall on the other side of the line. So, at the very minimum, the moral empiricist attracted to act consequentialism will have some difficult issues to resolve¹⁵, but at least the moral empiricist is not clearly committed to the denial of act consequentialism.

Deontological Theories

I think it is less difficult to reconcile moral empiricism deontologism than act consequentialism.¹⁶ The core idea behind some of the main deontological theories is that the intentions of the agent are what matter for determining the rightness or wrongness of an action. One example of a deontological theory holds that for an action to be morally right, it must flow from a good will or proper intentions - where proper intentions are thoughts of duty. The bottom line is that you must perform the action for the right reasons in order for it to be morally right. Given this kind of theory, right action will involve mental states that we could probably have perceptual knowledge of.

Consider, again, McGrath's example of seeing that someone is in pain. Presumably we can perceive that someone is in pain, because we directly perceive properties that are correlated in the right way to the internal property being-in-pain. Assuming that this is perfectly respectable perceptual knowledge, there should be no special obstacle in having perceptual knowledge of someone's intentions. As long as

there are detectable features of a person's behavior that are correlated *in the right way* to a person's internal mental states, we can have perceptual knowledge of the fact that an action was performed with a particular kind of intention.¹⁷

There is more to be said on this issue, but much of what can be said is related to the issue of reconciling moral perception with certain versions of virtue theory, so let's turn attention to that issue. What I say in the next section can be employed to bolster the claims in this section.

Virtue Theory

We can make sense of perceiving moral properties if they are identical with some deontological-type property, and we can probably say something similar for certain versions of virtue theory. Whether or not moral empiricism is compatible with virtue theory will depend on how the theory is developed. The core concept in virtue theory is, of course, *virtue*, but how the virtues relate to morally right actions vary according to different versions of virtue theory. One way of relating the virtues to morally right actions is to say that an action is morally right just in case it *flows* from one of the virtues. I will assume that *flows from* is some sort of causal relation.

Could we have perceptual knowledge of morally right actions if this were the correct moral theory? I suppose that we could. According to many virtue theorists, a virtue is some sort of disposition to behave in certain ways. So a morally right action will be one that bears a certain causal relation to a certain internal state. Presumably, there could be perceptible behavioral features that are related in the right way to those kinds of relations. There seems to be no special obstacle to think that these dispositions are perceptible in much the same way that pain and intentions are

perceptible. Presumably these dispositions are empirically detectable when actions are performed.

In fact, there is some positive evidence that something like this is the case. Robert Frank notes several studies identifying a correlation between internal emotional states (e.g., anger, guilt, sadness, surprise, and joy) and externally observable behaviors. Many of these behaviors are the result of involuntary muscle movements, changes in voice, or body language that are beyond the control of the person.¹⁸ Frank goes on to extend this to characteristics like honesty. People can (with involuntary changes in facial expressions, voice, and other bodily movements) send off detectable clues as to whether or not they are honest or trustworthy.¹⁹ Since some virtuous dispositions involve either the above emotional states or characteristics like honesty, it's not unreasonable to suppose that the exercise of some of these virtuous dispositions are empirically detectable. It's also not implausible to suppose that people could do this without being able to identify what visual cues they were sensitive to.

Counterfactual Theories

Even though the above version of virtue theory seems to be compatible with moral empiricism, there are other versions of virtue theory that are more questionable. These versions fall in the range of moral theories that I will call *counterfactual moral theories*. Counterfactual moral theories all fit the following schema:

(CF) An act A is morally right iff A would be P (were C to obtain).

Some versions of virtue theory hold that an action is morally right just in case that action would be performed by a virtuous person (were that virtuous person in similar

circumstances). These versions of virtue theory then qualify as a counterfactual moral theory.

Other examples of counterfactual moral theories are certain ideal observer theories and contractarian theories. Some versions of ideal observer theory hold that an action is morally right just in case it would be approved of by an ideal observer (were the ideal observer to consider it). Some versions of contractarian theories hold that an action is morally right just in case it is allowed by the contract that members of the society would agree to were they to get together and adopt such a contract.

To show that these counterfactual theories are compatible with moral empiricism, the moral empiricist must maintain that the truth of some counterfactuals are known (or at least can be known) on the basis of perception.

The moral empiricist might hold that the counterfactual facts strongly supervene on the actual facts, and so whatever actually instantiated properties are related in the right way to the counterfactual facts. However, some hold that modal facts *do not* strongly supervene on any other actual non-modal facts.²⁰ If these modal primitivists are right, then there is no strong supervenience of modal facts on other natural (non-modal) facts, and moral empiricists cannot appeal to strong supervenience to establish any reliable connection between the non-natural facts and the counterfactual facts.

But moral empiricists probably do not need to appeal to strong supervenience claims to support the claim that certain perceptible natural properties that some actions have are reliable indicators of the instantiation of certain counterfactual properties. However, it is not clear what these properties would be. Perhaps they

include some of the perceptible properties that consequentialists, deontologists, and non-counterfactual virtue theorists would identify with the directly observable properties that are correlated *in the right way* to moral properties. Perhaps a moral empiricist (attracted to some counterfactual theory) could hold that properties that one might think reliably indicate that an act has the best consequences, are caused by a good will, or flows from a virtue reliably indicate that a certain counterfactual property is instantiated.

In the end, it doesn't seem that there is going to be any special obstacle for the moral empiricist from moral theory. It's not clear that the moral empiricist will be constrained by act consequentialism, deontologism, certain virtue theories, or counterfactual theories. .

IV. Identity, Supervenience, and Correlation

The above sections make use of the notion a *regular correlation* between some simple, directly observable properties and some complex properties such that directly observing the former can yield basic perceptual knowledge of the latter. As I've noted this notion is weaker than identity or strong supervenience. I've also noted that it is difficult to articulate precisely what this notion is, but nevertheless I rely on it.

One might worry about such a messy, ill-defined notion grounding the possibility of empirical moral knowledge. One might also worry that such a notion is either accidental or too weak to do the required work.²¹ So it might be worth, at a minimum, discussing some plausible examples of this phenomenon.

There are several non-moral examples we can appeal to. My mother-in-law always buys hard salami and puts it in our refrigerator when she comes to town. Seeing hard salami in the fridge is regularly correlated with my mother-in-law being in town. This seems like I can have perceptual knowledge that my mother-in-law is in town by perceiving that there is salami in the fridge. The relation between the two facts (or properties) is not identity or supervenience. It's a regular (and accidental) correlation.

One might think that the above case involves inference, and so while it is empirical knowledge it's not *basic* knowledge. There are, however, plausible examples that do not involve any inference. Consider the vintners or the chicken sexers from the examples above. The property that chicken sexers are sensitive to is not identical to the property of being-male, and it doesn't supervene on the property being-male. The relation between the properties that chicken sexers directly observe and the property being male is likely accidental. Presumably whatever visual clues chicken sexers are sensitive to, it would be logically possible to have those properties be instantiated in a chick without that chick being biologically male.

So it seems that there are examples where regular correlation between A and B is strong enough such that perception of A is good enough to have *basic* perceptual knowledge that B is present. The relation need not be identity or supervenience.²²

So it's reasonably clear that there is a relation that sometimes obtains between two kinds of properties that is (a) an accidental correlation, and (b) such that observing one property can yield perceptual knowledge of the other property. Furthermore, it seems that this knowledge can be basic or non-inferential.

We need not give a thorough account of the relation because it seems clear enough that there is such a relation of correlation in many cases between two properties such that perceiving one yields perceptual knowledge of the other.

V. Is There Anything We Don't Perceive?

There is another difficult issue that is worth our attention. One might wonder: Is there anything that we *don't* perceive? I have maintained that we can have perceptual knowledge of one property in virtue of directly perceiving a property that the first property is in some sense correlated with. But surely correlation isn't always sufficient. The presence of the universe is correlated in some way with the instantiations of properties I directly observe, but I don't perceive the universe. The presence of electrons is regularly correlated with presence of directly observable properties, but it seems reasonably clear that I don't perceive electrons.

It seems that there are a lot of things that I cannot perceive, even though I can perceive either a part of them or something that is correlated with them. It would be good if the moral empiricist had something to say about this. What reason do we have for thinking that moral properties are in the class of things that we can perceive by directly perceiving some property that they're correlated with and not in the class of things like the universe or electrons?

I think there are, at least, three things the moral empiricist can say. One response would be to resist and say that we do perceive the universe and electrons, but I doubt that many will think this is a satisfying response.

A second response would be to say that it is in principle possible to perceive things like the universe in virtue of directly perceiving things that are regularly

correlated with the universe, but it takes a kind of recognitional capacity that we don't have, and that despite the difficulty in distinguishing between when this capacity is had with respect to some property, it seems reasonably clear that it is had with respect to moral properties.²³

A third option is to make a distinction between two different versions of moral empiricism.

Strong Moral Empiricism

We perceive moral properties by directly perceiving properties that are regularly correlated with moral properties.

Weak Moral Empiricism

We have perceptual knowledge that moral properties are instantiated because we directly perceive properties that are regularly correlated with moral properties.

Strong Moral Empiricism makes a claim about what the objects of perception are.

Our intuitions that electrons are not objects of ordinary everyday perception are pretty strong. If the moral empiricist endorses strong moral empiricism, then he will have to draw a line between those properties that we can perceive and those properties that we cannot perceive in virtue of directly perceiving properties that are regularly correlated with them. The moral empiricist will then have to explain why moral properties fall into the class of properties that can be perceived in virtue of directly perceiving properties that are regularly correlated with moral properties. The other option for strong moral empiricism is to pursue the strategy outlined in the previous paragraph, and hold that we can perceive things like electrons; it's just that we lack the recognitional capacity to do so.

However, with this distinction between strong and weak moral empiricism, the moral empiricist has another option. The claim that I am interested in defending is that we can have perceptual knowledge that moral properties are instantiated. Weak moral empiricism does not make a claim about what the objects of perception are. Weak moral empiricism makes a claim about what the objects of perceptual knowledge are. If the moral empiricist endorses weak moral empiricism, then he may not have to draw a line. We may have strong intuitions that we do not perceive things like the earth or electrons in virtue of directly perceiving other things that are correlated with them. However, it does seem that we can have perceptual knowledge that the earth is there or that electrons are present, in virtue of directly perceiving objects that are regularly correlated with the earth or electrons. This last option seems pretty plausible.

It may seem odd to say that we have perceptual knowledge that some P exists when we don't perceive P. I don't think it is so strange. There are a lot of things that we know perceptually even if we don't directly perceive those things. Consider the examples at the beginning of this chapter. I know that Fred told a joke; I know (on the basis of perception) that the property having told a joke was instantiated. This seems to be perceptual knowledge. However, I may not directly perceive the property having-told-a-joke. I perceive a lot of other stuff that is correlated in the right way with having-told-a-joke. It's difficult to see how this is anything other than ordinary perceptual knowledge.

VI. Smuggling In Non-Empirical Knowledge

There is one final worry. One might think that the moral empiricist is really just glossing over some background theory that apparent cases of moral perception involve. When you round the corner and see some kids light the cat on fire, what you *see* is some kids causing a thing suffering for no apparent reason. Combine that perceptual knowledge with your background *non-empirical* theory that causing suffering for no reason is wrong and that's how you get the justified moral belief. One could argue that we do not *really* have a case of moral perception here.

However, if we go back to the cases where we were prepared to admit that we had perceptual knowledge of complex properties; it's not clear that we have this knowledge on the basis of any sort of background theory. Sometimes I'm really good at identifying my friend from a distance, and I couldn't tell you anything about his facial features that led to that judgment (even upon serious, thorough reflection). Some people are really good at identifying maple trees without being able to identify any particular thing about the tree that makes it a maple. Chicken sexers can identify the particular sex of a chicken without being able to say anything specific about the features of the chicken that lead them to make the judgment about the chicken's sex.

The same seems to be true of some moral judgments. People sometimes see a situation and will say that something just doesn't seem right about it, but they won't necessarily be able to indicate what features the situation has that lead them to believe.

We might say that they are implicitly basing their beliefs in part on this non-empirical background theory, but the fact that people are sometimes unable to

identify this background theory is at least *some* evidence that this implicit basing doesn't always happen.²⁴

VII. Conclusion

I have defended the moral perception view from two of the major difficulties that it faces. This has not, however, been a full-fledged defense of the moral perception view, and I have not discussed all of the possible objections to it.²⁵

My major aim was to show that the moral perception view is not as ridiculous as one might initially suppose, and that there are some very plausible responses to some of the major worries that have received less attention.²⁶

Andrew Cullison
State University of New York, Fredonia
Andrew.Cullison@fredonia.edu

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¹ Recent defenders include McGrath 2004; Copp 2001; Watkins and Jolley 2002; and Oddie 2005. Although it should be noted that Oddie defends the possibility of perceiving more general normative properties. I assume he would think that his view includes moral properties.

² I will talk about our ability to see moral properties, but I intend to use that talk loosely. It may be that the immediate objects of perception are not properties themselves. For example, one might hold that properties are abstract universals and that we strictly speaking don't perceive these things. What we see is some event of instantiation. My primary aim is to defend the claim that we can have basic perceptual knowledge that some action is wrong. When I say we can see the wrongness of action, I mean to say that we can see that a particular action instantiates the property of wrongness.

³ Examples from McGrath 2004:221.

⁴ This example comes from Watkins 2002. In this cases the properties that vintners discriminate between are not merely some simple visual and gustatory perceptions, but their knowledge of which wine is in their glass is still empirical.

⁵ We should also note that people do this without being able to identify relevant features that obtain making them correctly judge whether persons are happy or sad. Sometimes persons are even wrong. They will say that the difference between the photographs is that the happy people are smiling and the sad people are not, when that is actually false. The difference in the photograph was pupil size. See Kornblith 2003. So, not only does it seem plausible to suppose that we have perceptual knowledge of these complex properties in virtue of perceiving some correlated simpler properties, but it's also *prima facie* plausible to suppose that this knowledge is epistemically basic (i.e, foundational or not based on inference.)

⁶ I say *complex* properties because I think instances of perceiving complex arrangements of natural properties provide the best sorts of cases to explain how moral perception is possible. If ethical naturalism is true, a moral property like being-wrong is probably going to be identical to or strongly supervene on a very complex arrangement of natural properties. To defend the claim that moral knowledge is a species of perceptual knowledge it seems best to focus on instances of perceptual knowledge of non-moral properties where the properties are complex.

⁷ We must be careful here. One might think that what is being presented is an ordinary language argument, and then object that we use *see* loosely in our language. Not only does it sometimes seem that we can truthfully utter sentences like those listed in the previous paragraph, but it also makes sense to utter sentences like "I see now that the answer to the math question is 48" or "I see that this argument is valid". These cases shouldn't count as evidence that people perceive numbers or logical properties.

However, I don't think McGrath's defense is an ordinary language argument. I think her idea is roughly that our knowledge that Fred told a joke is an empirical matter even though what is directly perceived may not be the property having-told-a-joke. What is directly perceived are some properties that are correlated in some appropriate way with the property of having-told-a-joke. There doesn't seem to be any good reason to think that moral properties are unlike other complex properties. Even if moral properties are not directly perceivable, there's little reason to think that they are not correlated with some directly perceivable properties in the same way that properties like having-told-a-joke are correlated with some set of directly perceivable properties. Since we think it is plausible to suppose that we can have perceptual knowledge in the non-moral cases, we should think that it's plausible that we can have perceptual knowledge in the moral cases.

⁸ Copp has recently considered four objections to this view. See Copp 2001. One of the objections is basically a version of the Open Question Argument. I think there are adequate responses to this in the literature, and I won't go into them here. Two other objections are, I think, adequately addressed. However, I feel it necessary to discuss this fourth objection because I don't agree with Copp on the solution. I will not discuss Copp's response to the objection in the body of this section, but I will note here why I find his solution to this fourth objection inadequate.

Copp appeals to two theses to address the objection. The first thesis is what he calls *epistemological naturalism*, and it looks like a version of reliabilism. I won't argue for it here, but I don't think reliabilism is true and any satisfactory argument against reliabilism would be a satisfactory argument against Copp.

The other thesis that Copp appeals to is called a Society-Centered Moral Theory. It's not clear what a society-centered theory is, but in so far as I understand the concept of *society-centered*, I don't think the society-centered theory is true. Copp says, "According to society-centered theory, moral properties relate actions, persons, traits of character, institutions, and the like to the requirements of a moral code that is relevantly justified in relation to a relevant society." Copp 2001:48. This sounds like either a kind of cultural relativism or social-contract theory. I am skeptical that either moral theory is true, but I will not deal with objections here. I think we can respond to the objection that Copp addresses without appealing to reliabilism and without appealing to either of these particular moral theories.

⁹ There is a problem with holding that there are enough directly observable properties correlated with *having-the-best-consequences* to plausibly maintain that the moral property is observable. We'll be considering this in a later section. For now let's assume that there are enough directly observable properties.

¹⁰ Examples from McGrath 2004:221.

¹¹ Indeed, there are people like this. Some people suffer brain damage and lose the ability to process raw experiential data the way they once would have processed it. It seems appropriate to say that in some sense there is something wrong with their perceptual faculty on the broad understanding of what a perceptual faculty is.

¹²Consider chicken sexers again. What is immediately present in their visual field is not the property of being-male. Yet they seem to have immediate, basic perceptual knowledge that a particular chick is a male on the basis of perceiving directly observable, simple properties.

¹³It's been suggested to me that what it is for an event to have parts is very unclear, and that perhaps this point could be better made without relying on such a notion. This seems right, but I'm not quite sure how the argument would go.

Furthermore, it seems fair for the objector to assume that events do have parts even if it is unclear what it is for events to have parts since it is widely taken for granted in several other debates that events do have part. Consider the debate between compositional monists and compositional pluralists - who debate whether or not the part-whole relation between material objects and their parts is the same part-whole relation as the relation between events and their parts - see Kris McDaniel (forthcoming) for a discussion of this debate. Both sides of the debate take it for granted that events do have parts in some sense - the debate is about whether it's the same sense or not.

In other debates it is generally assumed by both sides that events have parts. For example - in the temporal parts debate Katherine Hawley notes that "most endurantists, perdurantists and others agree that processes or events have temporal parts: whether or not I have earlier and later parts, my birthday party certainly does.' See Hawley 2004.

¹⁴ It may be argued that for all I know Bob's pleasure is so great and Frank's pain so little and the after affects of this event on other events so minimal that it really is the case that Bob's action has the best consequences. However, the mere fact that my perception is undetermined in this manner doesn't undermine the justification for my belief any more than undetermination in any case of perceptions of the external world undermine beliefs about the external world. So, this wouldn't be a special problem for perception of properties like has-the-best-consequences. It's a problem for perception of any property.

¹⁵ Ultimately, this may be (in part) because it is difficult to say how act consequentialism is compatible with moral knowledge. There are some who hold that we have no moral knowledge precisely because they think that some version of consequentialism is true and that since we cannot know whether or not an action has the best consequences, we cannot know whether it was right or wrong. If the entailment they hold is correct, then I think the moral empiricist can hold that this may be a problem for act consequentialism. Any defense of act consequentialism must say how it is that we can know particular moral propositions based on our limited evidence of the particular facts. I suspect that we will be able to give an account of how we can know some of those moral propositions on the basis of perception.

¹⁶It's less difficulty to reconcile act consequentialism with the view that moral knowledge is empirical and inferential. It's allowing for epistemically basic moral knowledge that is more difficult to reconcile with act consequentialism because so very little of the event that determines rightness or wrongness is given in experience.

¹⁷ There is evidence to suggest that a wide variety of internal mental states are correlated with external directly observable behaviors. Many of these behaviors are involuntary and may involve something as small as a slight change in facial muscle position. Emotions like anger, guilt, happiness, and surprise are all connected with these detectable changes. Frank Robert extends this to the characteristic of honesty. He argues that whether or not someone is trustworthy can be seen by visible changes in the person's external characteristics. See Frank H. Robert 1988 chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁸ Frank 1988:114-130.

¹⁹ Frank 1988:134-145.

²⁰ See Sider 2003b.

²¹Thanks to an anonymous referee for making bringing up both of these points.

²²It's worth noting that this may go some ways toward addressing a concern that Gilbert Harman raises against the possibility of perceiving moral properties. He notes.

In the absence of a way of reducing moral claims to psychological or sociological claims, there is a real problem as to the testability of moral claims, because it is obscure how the rightness or wrongness of an action can manifest itself in the world in a way that can affect the sense organs of people. Harman. (1986) p.66.

I've offered ways in which one could have perceptual knowledge of moral properties without it even really being necessary that the moral properties themselves *do* directly affect the sense organs. Perceptual knowledge that a property is instantiated seems possible *without* it being the case that the property directly affects the sense organs.

²³ We see a similar move in some discussions of The Problem of the Speckled Hen. We think we can have basic knowledge that there is a triangle in front of us on the basis of perceiving it, but if we can, then it seems that we should be able to have basic knowledge that there is a 21-sided figure in front of us on the basis of perceiving it. Proponents of basic perceptual knowledge are forced to find a relevant difference, concede that we can have basic knowledge that there is a 21-sided figure, or concede that we cannot have basic knowledge that there is a 3-sided figure. See Sosa and Bonjour 2003:119-140. One solution offered by Richard Feldman is that a recognitional capacity is what enable us to have basic perceptual knowledge that there is a three sided figure in front of us. It is in principle possible to have basic knowledge of a 21-sided figure. We can imagine intelligent beings who are able to immediately recognize 21-sidedness. They could have basic knowledge of 21-sidedness, but we (contingently) lack the recognitional capacity required to have that basic knowledge.

See Feldman 2004b. We could say something similar in this case where we are asked to draw a line. What we are being asked to draw looks very similar to what proponents of basic perceptual knowledge are asked to draw in the Problem of the Speckled Hen.

²⁴ Gilbert Harman has an excellent discussion of these kinds of cases. See Harman 2005.

²⁵For example, some have argued that we can extract an objection to the view that we can perceive moral properties by drawing on Hume's famous discussion about the nature of causation. McGrath has a good discussion of the problem with this objection. See McGrath 2005. There are also a number of objections against the view that we can perceive moral properties that rely on an argument that is very similar to the open question argument against ethical naturalism. The idea is that moral properties are not the right sort of property that could causally affect us in the way that would be required for perception. Harman and Sturgeon discuss one variant of this objection. See Harman 2006 and Sturgeon 2006. Another variant of this objection is discussed in Copp 2001. I will not be devoting much space to discussing these objections. I think there are things that can be said in response to these objections, but for reasons of space I will not discuss them in further detail here. As I noted earlier in this paper, I'm setting aside objections that are basically variants of the open question argument.

²⁶I am indebted to many people for helpful feedback on the ideas in this paper including Richard Feldman, Earl Conee, Ed Wierenga, Andrei Buckareff, Dan Mittag, Chris Tillman, Patrick Kenny, Joshua Spencer, Andrew Wake, Greg Fowler, John Shoemaker, and Sharon Ryan.