



Moral Perception

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II—JONATHAN DANCY

MORAL PERCEPTION

I start by examining Robert Audi's positive suggestions about moral perception, and then attempt to point out some challengeable assumptions that he seems to make, and to consider how things might look if those assumptions are abandoned.

I

One possible view about moral perception is the Relaxed View. This is the view that we should not make too much fuss about the claim that one can see that an action was unjust, or wrong. We happily allow that we can see that a climb is risky, hear that a joke was funny and feel that someone is uneasy. And we need make no bones about saying that we can see the riskiness, hear the humour and feel the uneasiness.

It might well be said of this view, as Richard Hare said in another context, that such remarks are innocuous until they are turned into a theory. But innocuous or not, the Relaxed View is not Robert Audi's view. He thinks that there is a special way in which moral properties and moral facts are experienceable, perceptible. His picture is not a sixth-sense theory, more like a five-and-a-half-sense theory; for there would be no moral perception if we did not have the other five senses, especially that of sight. Our moral sense, if we have one, is an adaptation or extension of one or the other of our five senses. This is worth laying out.

Audi starts from a causal theory of perception. For me to perceive an object is for that object to produce or sustain in me (in the right way) an appropriate phenomenal representation of itself. There is a causal relation here; producing and sustaining are causal transactions. What are the terms of this causal relation? The effect is my perceiving an object; this is a partly phenomenal event. The cause is such a thing as my hand's turning; this is what Audi calls a 'depend-

ent particular'; the hand is an independent particular, and that hand's turning is a unique thing in time and space, a particular which is still dependent on something more basic than it. The hand is more basic than its turning, because the one can exist without the other but the other cannot exist without the one.

For Audi, when I see an object, what causes my doing so is the object's possessing or instantiating certain (normally observable) properties. What is more, I see the object by seeing the instantiations of those properties.¹ These are the dependent particulars. What happens is that the instantiations of the observable properties cause what he calls our 'phenomenal awareness' of them. That awareness is another instantiation: 'a phenomenal instantiation of certain phenomenal properties'.² The instantiation of those phenomenal properties in me represents its cause, that is, the instantiations of the observable properties out there. When all this happens, I see the object. For Audi, it does not make sense to talk of seeing an object directly, if that means 'other than by seeing certain of its properties'.

Now Audi allows that 'moral properties are not easily conceived as observable', at least not as observable 'in the most elementary way'. For one thing, instantiations of them cannot cause phenomenal representations of themselves; this is because no such representations are possible (though it might have been because instantiations of moral properties cannot cause anything at all). There are representations of moral properties, but those representations are 'intellective' rather than phenomenal. Apparently, however, such intellective representations may be 'integrated with phenomenal elements' (a dark phrase). For another thing, 'even the perceptible properties on which the possession of moral properties is based may not be strictly speaking observable, at least in this elementary way' (Audi 2010, p. 87). I don't claim to understand this contrast between the perceptible and the observable, however, and will try to ignore it

¹ It is generally best to characterize forms of indirect realism in ways that avoid suggesting that we see two sorts of thing at once; for example, instead of saying that we see both physical objects and sensa, we might say that we see physical objects and perceive sensa, and that we do the one by doing the other. Audi's claim that we see objects by seeing their properties seems to me at least a little awkward in this respect.

² I feel sure that there are too many 'phenomenal's here. The instantiation of the phenomenal properties surely does not itself have the property of being phenomenal. And how can an awareness *be* simply the instantiation of certain phenomenal properties? The awareness ought to have a directedness in it, an intentionality that the instantiation could never have. Something seems to be a bit off beam here.

for as long as possible.³ The main point *may* still be good: you cannot observe the wrongness of an action if you cannot observe those features of the action that make it wrong.

Are we reduced, then, to saying that one cannot observe a moral property such as wrongness or injustice, and can only observe those among the base properties for that wrongness that are observable? Not according to Audi. There is another, less elementary way, in which we can think of moral properties as observable. We should distinguish between two sorts of phenomenal representation, one of which is cartographic, or pictorial, the other of which is not. There is such a thing as a richer (but still phenomenal) response to injustice, a sense of injustice, and this can perhaps serve as an experiential element in moral perception.

Two questions arise at this point. The first is whether this notion of a second sort of phenomenal representation is intelligible. The second is whether, if so, it gives us a recognizable notion of moral perception. For all we have yet seen, we might be dealing with moral feeling or sentiment *rather than* anything worth calling perception.

In addressing the first issue, we are faced with this passage:

Suppose, however, that we distinguish between a phenomenal—and, especially, a cartographic—representation of injustice and a phenomenal representation constituted by a (richer) *response* to injustice. The sense of injustice, then, as based on, and phenomenally integrated with, a suitable ordinary perception of the base properties on which injustice is consequential, might serve as an experiential element in moral perception. (Audi 2010, pp. 88–9)

One's first thought is that the first sentence asks us to distinguish between a phenomenal representation of injustice and a phenomenal representation of something else. But that would hardly serve the purpose of constructing a suitable account of moral perception. The second phenomenal representation must still be a representation of injustice, but it is one that is constituted by a (richer) response to the injustice. ‘Richer than what?’, one might ask. Presumably the idea here is that a sense of injustice is a representation of the injustice sensed, but it is richer than a merely pictorial representation could

³ It may be that the ‘observable’ is to be understood as that the awareness of which requires no training, no experience, no knowledge of anything else, and so on. If so, I am deeply suspicious of this notion, especially if it is supposed to be basic, that is, to underly other awarenesses. See below, §IV.

hope to be. (Since, apparently, there can't be a pictorial representation of injustice, we need not be talking about great riches here.) Guessing wildly, and without much by way of a clue as to what is intended, I surmise that the sort of richness at issue might be the way one feels when one feels a sense of injustice, of which outrage is a good example. That outrage is a phenomenal representation of the injustice.

Supposing this to be intelligible, I now want to say that it cannot be right. The outrage is directed towards the act as unjust, so the act is represented as unjust, indeed, but not, I would say, by the outrage. Suppose a case at which I am outraged by reading an account of the behaviour of a mob in 1905. My outrage is directed toward the behaviour as unjust, though I am not experiencing the features of that behaviour that make it unjust; I have an intellectual representation of the behaviour, and a sense of injustice which is constituted by my outrage. But that outrage is at the behaviour represented, it is not a further, non-pictorial representation of it. Shift the example now so that I am in fact watching the relevant behaviour. It doesn't seem to me that the structure changes. We still have a representation of the behaviour, phenomenal now, and outrage at that. I don't see how the outrage can count as a representation of that to which it is a response, and if it doesn't, I don't see how its presence can convert a standard perception of the properties that ground the injustice into a perception of the property so grounded. What we are trying to achieve here is a conception of a state that is genuinely perceptual, but has a moral content. The phenomenal properties of outrage, even when added to a perception of the base properties, don't seem to generate a content of that sort.

The point is really quite general. Audi wants to have it that a response to injustice can be, or at least constitute, a representation of that injustice. But the response is to it *as unjust*, and this means that the representation of the act as unjust is distinct from any intentional response to it as such.

I suspect that Audi will suppose that I have paid inadequate attention to his talk of phenomenal integration. So let us pursue that angle, still trying to interpret the passage quoted above. The phrase 'The sense of injustice, then, *as* based on ...' is interesting. It seems to say something different from 'The sense of injustice, then, being based on ...'. So what is the '*as*' doing? The natural way of reading it is as suggesting either that our sense of injustice is a sense of the

ground, the features that make it unjust, or that it is a sense of the injustice as based on that ground. But neither of these can be what is intended, since the passage continues '*as* based on, and phenomenally integrated with, a suitable ordinary perception of the properties on which the injustice is consequential'. The injustice itself is not based on (and is not sensed as being based on) a *perception* of certain properties, but on those properties themselves, and with these it is surely not phenomenally integrated. (At least, this is so on Audi's conception of the phenomenal, under which phenomenal properties are always properties of a person.) So it must be the *sense* of injustice that is based on, and phenomenally integrated with, the perception of the properties that are the base for the injustice sensed. But this is an entirely new conception of basing. It is one thing to talk of moral properties being based on the properties on which they are consequential. It is quite another to talk of a sense of one property being based on a perception of other properties. Further, I have as yet no idea what can be meant by 'integrated with' here if it is anything other than a vague notion of what is mixed up with what.

There is however more help to be got two paragraphs further on, where there is less terminology to wade through. There we read that 'The theory ... does, however, construe seeing a subset of base properties for injustice as—at least given appropriate understanding of their connection to moral properties—a kind of perception of a moral property' (Audi 2010, p. 90). In suitable cases, 'we may normally be unable to witness these things without a phenomenal sense of wrongdoing integrated with our perceptual representation of the wrong-making facts' (Audi 2010, p. 90). In simple terms, this seems to mean that in some cases, where we perceive the base properties and understand them as bases for wrongness in this case, our perception of them can count as perception of the wrongness itself. The question is, which are those suitable cases? And we are told that they are the ones in which we have, in addition to the first two elements (that is, we perceive the base properties and understand them as such), a phenomenal sense of wrong, and this phenomenal sense of wrong is integrated with our perceptual representation of the base.

Let us abandon my previous suggestion that the sense of injustice was a feeling of outrage, which may have been a red herring, and think instead of feeling that the action is wrong. In these terms the suitable cases for moral perception are the ones in which we cannot avoid feeling that the action is wrong (say), and our feeling this way

is a representation of the action as wrong (and so has the desired moral content) and is integrated with our perceptual representation of the base, which we understand as such. Now suppose that we admit that there is such a thing as feeling that an action is wrong—which I at least am not tempted to deny, even if I remain unsure what it amounts to. (I feel that there are several difficulties here, but I don't know that difficulties are properly said to be feelable.) Then, perhaps, the only remaining difficulty will be that of making suitable sense of the notion of integration.

But to allow that there is such a thing as feeling that an action is wrong is to assume as given the very sort of thing we were trying to understand in the first place. For someone who was worried about perceiving the wrongness is surely going to be equally worried about feeling it. For there is still the worry that we have not been shown how to make a perception of a moral property out of a perception of non-moral properties and a moral emotion. So this simplifying manoeuvre doesn't look as if it is going to work.

Further, the notion of integration does not look promising. It must mean one of three things. First, that we are dealing here with one thing rather than many. Second, that though they are two, they are necessarily connected, so that neither could persist without the other. Third, that though they are not necessarily connected, they are still intermingled in some way. But at this stage I am just going to say that none of these seem very plausible to me, if the things to be integrated are a perception of relevant facts, an understanding of them as such and a feeling of wrongness.

II

So far I have merely said that I haven't been able to make decent sense of Audi's positive suggestion about how moral perception might be possible. But now I want to give reason for wondering whether he has started in the right place.

Audi seems to take it as axiomatic that if one perceives an object, one perceives it by perceiving some of its properties. When one perceives some of its properties, what one is perceiving is a dependent particular, its having or instantiating those properties. Objects are not directly perceptible; instantiations of properties are. I don't want to challenge this—at least, not here. What I do want to challenge is

the idea that when one perceives an instantiation of a property, and that instantiation is grounded in instantiations of other properties, one perceives the former only by perceiving the latter.

Obviously one needs to be careful about the grounding relation that is the hinge here. I can see someone win the race even though he won the race by running faster than the others and I did not see him running faster than them. I just saw him getting to the winning post first. But this sort of by-relation is not the right one to be thinking about. I have my eyes rather on the indefinable relation which I call resultance. Rightness and wrongness are resultant (or ‘consequential’) properties, properties which actions have in virtue of having other properties. This ‘in virtue of’ does not signify a causal relation, nor is it a logical one. The properties in virtue of which an action is wrong are the features that make it wrong—but I don’t suggest that ‘make’ here is any more informative than is ‘in virtue of’. The features that make an action wrong do not entail that it is wrong. They could have been present without making the action wrong, and would have been if there had been some overriding reason to do the action. Still, that there was no overriding reason to do the action is not one of the features that go to make the action wrong. Not every necessary condition for successful wrong-making is one of the features that actually do that wrong-making.

So, supposing perhaps unwarily that I have a good sense of what I am talking about here, I want to suggest that one can perceive instantiations of resultant properties without necessarily perceiving the property-instantiations from which they result. (I will from now on drop the phrase ‘instantiations of properties’ in favour of the simpler ‘properties’.) So one can perceive a resultant property, the dangerousness of the cliff, say, without perceiving the features that make the cliff dangerous. I only say that one *can* do this; not that one always does, or even that one normally does. The general point is that the epistemology of resultance need not follow its metaphysics.

In his *The Good in the Right*, Audi writes:

If moral properties are consequential on non-normative (‘natural’) ones, it is to be expected that an act’s possessing the former should be explainable by appeal to its possession of a certain set of the latter. Moreover, given the apparent dependence of singular moral judgments on knowledge or justified belief regarding the relevant facts ... it is to be expected that knowledge of specific duties arises (ultimately) from knowledge of the facts that ground them. (Audi 2005, p. 86)

This passage is larded with signs of caution: ‘it is to be expected that’, twice, and ‘apparent dependence’. But I don’t think that Audi himself feels any reluctance to sign up to a non-cautious version, and I would accept that the first sentence here is true enough (another sign of caution). There is then a question about the logical form of the second sentence, which, given a normative conception of dependence, seems very close to a tautology. But my real question here is whether there is any reason to believe that ‘knowledge of specific duties arises (ultimately) from knowledge of the facts that ground them’.

A funny joke is made funny by other properties that it has. A joke cannot just *be* funny, as one might say. But one may well be amused without having much idea of what makes the joke funny. There are different forms of intelligence, and we can be aware of someone’s intelligence without yet being aware of the sort of intelligence she has. A person cannot just *be* attractive, but one can be aware of the attractiveness without yet knowing how she gets to be so attractive. (Something in the way she looks ...) Finally, skilled chess players can tell that a position is weak at a glance, without yet knowing where the weakness lies.⁴ If these things are so, why should it be any different with moral properties, if they are perceivable at all?

Now that is a rhetorical question, and it invites us to make a decision about which properties we are focusing on. Audi’s paper mainly discusses the perception of injustice and of wrongness. These are pretty thin properties. Perhaps there is something in the thinness that prevents one from generalizing from the examples above to moral properties in general. I will discuss this later, but one suggestion here is that the buck-passing conception of wrongness renders wrongness invisible. (And if it can’t be seen, it can’t be heard or smelled either.) That suggestion arises because the buck-passing conception of wrongness sees wrongness as verdictive, and verdicts are essentially intellective rather than perceptual (to borrow a distinction of Audi’s).

But still there are other moral properties, the thicker ones such as the virtues. Can one suppose that there is more difficulty in seeing that someone is kind than there is in seeing that they are intelligent? Do we need a special ‘response to intelligence’ in order to keep the

⁴ There is a very interesting chapter on this in McKeever and Ridge (2006); see also Gladwell (2005).

perceptibility of intelligence on the road—by analogy with the ‘richer response to injustice’? There are as few, or as many, mysteries in seeing that someone is acting intelligently as in seeing that she is acting kindly.

We tend to think that the way to establish the perceptibility of moral distinctions is to rely on the perceptibility of wrong-making features. What he did was wrong: she was in trouble and he walked away. These things can be seen; I saw her on the ground with a broken leg and I saw him walking away. Now of course we need an account of how those features go to make the action wrong. Audi’s account is a Rossian one: there are *prima facie* wrong-making features here, and even if we cannot perceive wrongness proper, we can perceive the *prima facie* wrong (by courtesy of the ‘richer response’). There is then a question how we move from that to recognition of wrongness proper. There are well-known problems with any merely additive conception of this move. It seems to be generally agreed that though the individual wrong-making features may each make their own contribution, still some difference can also be made by the way in which those features are configured in the whole. There is, or may be, a sort of pattern which they form, a sort of shape, and sound overall judgement requires an ability to factor that in as well, though it would be wrong to think of that shape as another contributing feature. (That way lies regress.)

The Rossian aspect of this includes the idea that we know *a priori* that this or that feature brings *prima facie* wrongness with it; there is an entailment involved. I have often expressed dissent at this point. Perhaps the crucial issue for present purposes is whether there are any thick moral properties that are variant in their relevance. If we can suppose that kindness is a moral property, and that kindness is not always appropriate, we must suppose that whether the kindness displayed here makes the action more, or less, morally defensible is a matter of how the particular case is configured, that is, of what other properties are co-present and of how the various relevant properties relate to each other. This is my non-Moorean conception of organic unities (see Dancy 2003). It makes epistemological trouble for me. For Audi, by contrast, once we have established the presence of a *prima facie* wrong-making feature we know already that there is a morally undesirable aspect of the situation; this does not need to be perceived (though he would say that it still can be). For me, however, even if there is a short list of morally rele-

vant features to work with, one still has to look at the context to determine what relevance such a feature actually has in the present case. There is more for perception to do, on my account. I suppose that this is both a strength and a weakness.

Still, one might say, we are all in the business of bottom-up epistemology. We start at the level of individual *prima facie* right-making and wrong-making features, put them all together to see what sort of contribution each is making in the present case, and work from that to a view about duty proper, about where (as it is sometimes put) the balance of duty lies. But I am suggesting that we can (sometimes) perceive the wrongness proper, and work downwards from that to a view about how that wrongness is made; or rather, that if we cannot do this, we want to be quite sure why not. The answer will not be that wrongness is a resultant, or consequential property. But it still might be that wrongness is thin.

III

I have now expressed doubts about the inference from the metaphysics of resultance to its epistemology. But there are other familiar doubts about the bottom-up picture that Audi offers us, doubts that he does not address. These concern the properties that constitute the ground for the moral properties we are to perceive.

Audi offers us a standard picture under which the properties from which moral properties result are themselves non-moral properties. Now of course an act can be generous because it is a substantial donation to a needy cause. Some moral properties result from other moral properties. But I think that Audi would insist that eventually, as one heads downwards, one will come to a non-moral property, a property that is uncontroversially (in the present context, anyway) perceptible. The ultimate ground, if one can put it this way, is going to be non-moral, even if we pass through several layers of moral properties on the way. This is presumably because resultance is transitive: if property *M* results from properties *N* and *P*, and property *N* results from properties *R* and *S*, then property *M* results (partly) from properties *R* and *S*. I mention this point because it is at least debatable. If we express moral resultance in terms of the ‘making’ relation, as I did above, it seems perfectly conceivable that an action should be made wrong by having certain properties, and have those

properties by virtue of having certain other properties, without the latter properties counting as wrong-makers in the way that the former do. They will, of course, be part of any complete explanation of how the action got to be wrong, but that does not yet show that they play the special role of wrong-makers within that explanation.

A similar worry emerges when we consider the notion of a pattern. I suggested above that though the individual wrong-making features each make their own contribution, still some difference may also be made by the way in which those features are configured in the present case. Now it would be a mistake to suppose that that configuration, or pattern, must be a further wrong-making feature; that way lies regress. But still the pattern lies at the same level of explanation, as one might put it, as the wrong-making features so patterned. The question then is whether the pattern is itself another moral property. This sounds a bit odd, perhaps; it would perhaps sound a bit better to ask whether our awareness of the pattern is moral awareness. Take a case where the grounding features, the wrong-makers, are all unequivocally natural properties. Must a pattern of such features be a natural pattern? Or might it be that what we have here is a set of natural features in a non-natural pattern? If the latter is possible, then there will be cases where the uncontroversial perceptibility of the grounding features does not suffice to show that everything relevant at that level is perceivable. For an example, consider the recognition of fittingness and unfittingness (appropriateness and inappropriateness would do equally well). The wrongness of his response to her situation might derive from a failure of the one to fit the other. The failure to fit is a non-natural relation between situation and response, and it is not part of the ground for the wrongness, since it does not play the same role in the explanation of the wrongness as is played by the ‘nature’ of her situation and his response.

Does Audi deny this? It is hard to be sure. He says that even if one can observe the features that constitute the ground of an injustice, this may not be enough for one to observe the injustice, because one’s perceiving the latter depends on one’s understanding the significance of what one has seen (Audi 2010, pp. 87–8). He also says that his approach ‘does, however, construe seeing a subset of base properties for injustice as—at least given appropriate understanding of their connection to moral properties—a kind of perception of a

moral property' (Audi 2010, p. 90). So more is required than awareness of the ground: one has also to understand it as the ground. The point here is that the need for understanding prevents us from seeing the relevant state as perceptual through and through. But this looks like a different point from the point I was making in the previous paragraph, about the role of patterns and the possibility that a pattern of perceivable features might not itself be perceivable.

Another way of accepting the points I have been making in this section and carrying on regardless would be to say that we were only trying to establish that moral properties are *sometimes* perceived. They can be perceived in cases where the ground is entirely non-moral, and where the pattern makes no moral difference (and perhaps where Audi's two further conditions are satisfied; see above). If they cannot be perceived in other cases, this doesn't matter.

This manoeuvre would seem to leave us arguing whether the sort of scenario envisaged is common enough to be significant, and that is not a debate that I think of as likely to be very fruitful. More to the point, in my view, is whether our recognition of a moral property even in the more difficult cases that I have been describing might still be held to be perceptual in nature.

IV

A skilled and experienced car mechanic listening to a car engine can hear that there is something wrong with the water pump. Are we to say that what he hears is a certain recognizable pattern of sounds, not the malfunctioning of the pump? He might be quite unable to describe those sounds other than as 'how it sounds when the water-pump is failing'. That is to say, it is under that concept that he categorizes what he is hearing. Of course, not all failing waterpumps sound identical. The mechanic's experience enables him to ignore the differences and discern the similarity. In fact he probably doesn't hear the differences at all. For him, the basic category is not 'sounds in such-and-such a way' but 'sounds the (sort of) way failing waterpumps sound'. We might say that this is not perception but judgement; he hears the sounds and judges that such-and-such a state of affairs is the cause. But the mechanic need not agree. He could allow that *sometimes* that is how it is, but insist that it is not like that here.

Some would want to insist that even if he categorizes what he is hearing as ‘how it sounds when a water pump is failing’, there has to be a more basic level of description of what is going on than this. Such an insistence is likely to be built upon what I take to be a fundamental mistake in the philosophy of perception, namely the view that the primary, or basic object of perceptual awareness must be things for the sensing of which no training, knowledge or experience is necessary. Those tempted by this view suppose that training, knowledge and experience cannot alter the way in which things look, sound or feel to us. All they can do is to enable us to notice things we would not have noticed before, and no doubt when we are able to do that, our attention may be distracted from the more basic features that are still the primary and proper objects of sensation. Now I think of this view as a mistake. I have always found very persuasive John McDowell’s example of the way jazz sounds to an aficionado and the way it sounds to a tyro. To the tyro it is just a whirl of unorganized noise, while to the aficionado it sounds like the development of a theme. It just doesn’t seem promising to insist that at a basic level the two people share a common phenomenal awareness.

Does Audi think otherwise? There is some reason to say that he does, because of the distinction he draws between the elementary and the non-elementary. He writes that ‘moral properties are not easily conceived as observable, in what seems the most elementary way: no sensory phenomenal representation is possible for them, as opposed to *intellective* representations, though these may be integrated with phenomenal elements’ (Audi 2010, p. 87). Two things seem challengeable here. The first is that there is something elementary in all perception, so that, for instance, the mechanic’s basic awareness cannot be of the defective functioning of the water pump. The second is the idea that one can observe only that of which one has a sensory phenomenal representation, which can be adverted to as such. For instance, one can see differences and absences, but there is no such thing as a sensory phenomenal representation of a difference or an absence *as such*. I myself also think that one can feel irrelevance long before one is able to say where it lies; but the idea of a sensory phenomenal representation of irrelevance does seem a bit far-fetched.

Of course much will depend on the sense we give to the phrase ‘sensory phenomenal representation’, which I have simply copied

from Audi in an attempt to play by his rules. It is hard to know whether it is intended as a tautology or not. One possible way forward is to insist that it is not a tautology, so that there is room for the notion of a sensory representation that is not phenomenal. The whiff of irrelevance might be a good example. One might have a sense of irrelevance, then, without that irrelevance being represented phenomenally.

The truth, I suspect, is that we do perception an injustice (a palpable one, perhaps) by limiting it to that of which there can be sensory phenomenal representations. No doubt there has to be some sensory activity, some phenomenal presence or presentation. But it does not follow from this that everything we sense must be phenomenally represented. I can observe that these two books are not the same colour; there is no need to look for a phenomenal representation of the colours as different. I can observe that one person is taller than another without any phenomenal representation of the height of either of them (for which I would need a context, which might not be supplied); but is there a phenomenal representation of tallerness? I can observe that my wife has come into the room; I am not restricted to observing that someone has come into the room whom I recognize ‘intellectually’ to be my wife. And so on.

One might reply that this is all to do with seeing that things are so, and that the real debate concerns the perception of properties. But difference is a property that can be observed but not phenomenally represented. And my wife’s coming into the room is one of Audi’s dependent particulars.

The two challengeable aspects of Audi’s conception of what is basic or elementary in perception constitute limiting or reductive conceptions of the perceptible, and such things seem to me to have unfortunate consequences. It is a familiar point that scepticism about moral knowledge is hard to keep within its original bounds; it tends to lead to other scepticisms, for instance about the unobserved, or about other minds, or about the evaluative more generally. Similarly, I suggest, we lose far more than the perceptibility of the moral if we insist on a role for the elementary in moral perception, or if we require phenomenal representation. Action itself is in danger of being imperceptible on such restrictive criteria. We would be reduced to the perception of motion, since presumably there is no phenomenal representation of purpose or intentionality. One can perceive the motion, but not the moving; his hand’s moving, but not

his moving his hand. This would, of course, give us yet another bogus reason for supposing that moral properties are imperceptible: they would be properties of imperceptible objects, namely actions. But against this I would want to insist that a criterion that has this sort of consequence discredits itself.

In general, if we are to make sense of moral perception, it should be as the ordinary perception of moral objects or properties. We should not find ourselves inventing further senses, or special adaptations of the existing senses, in order to make moral perception possible. We do this only if we yield to the perennial temptation of what one might call ‘reducing’ conceptions of perception; and all talk of what is ‘primarily’ perceptible, or of what is basic or elementary in perception, is a sign of that temptation’s power.

V

When we puzzle ourselves about moral perception, we should try to be clear what we are counting as ‘moral’. Audi’s examples are mostly to do with perceiving the injustice of an act. I would prefer to start by considering the perceptibility of instantiations of thick concepts. Can we perceive the elegance of a dress, the fineness of a brush stroke, the brusqueness of a reply, or the poise of a dancer? These are no doubt not moral concepts, but there are moral concepts like them, instantiations of which surely share their perceptibility. I can perceive its being her turn (my favourite example of a thick moral concept), the caring nature of a response, the courtesy or the rudeness of a gesture. The fact that (as I suppose) these are moral concepts seems to raise no problems beyond those we have already refused to take seriously in allowing the perceptibility of elegance. All these thick concepts are essentially evaluative, in the sense that competence with them requires a grasp of their evaluative or practical point. But this is not at odds with the perceptibility of instantiations of them. And their being moral seems to change nothing, to add no special difficulties in this respect.

The perceptibility of the thin—the right, the wrong, the obligatory and the permissible, and maybe the just and the unjust⁵—is more

⁵ Samuel Scheffler (1987) suggested long ago (in a critical notice of Bernard Williams’s *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*) that the distinction between thick and thin is rather unstable, citing justice as a borderline case.

problematic. But this, as I suggested earlier, may be because thin moral properties are thin, not because they are moral properties. According to verdictive conceptions of the thin, being wrong is the property of being such that the moral reasons in the case speak overall against action. It does seem hard to suppose that instantiations of this verdictive property could be perceived as such.

Admittedly, this raises the question why not. I have already eschewed the argument that they cannot be perceived because there cannot be a sensory phenomenal representation of them. So I need another explanation. One such would be that the force of a reason is not itself perceptible, and so a balance or combination of such forces is not perceptible either. Allowing this inference, we would still have a question about the truth of the premiss. Cannot the force of a reason be felt? There is one account of that force which does render it feelable, palpable, sensible, by identifying the force of a reason with motivating force. Sadly, however, I side with those who take this to be a conflation of two very different sorts of force, normative force and motivating force. So for me there is a question why the normative force, or strength, of a reason is insensible, and I don't have an answer to this question.

There are however non-verdictive conceptions of the thin to be considered, such as Derek Parfit's 'not to be done' or Allan Gibbard's 'OK to plan for'—and the argument I have been considering here does not apply to the thin, so conceived, at all. What is more, the verdictive conception only applies to deontic thin properties. It does not address evaluative thin properties—of which the prime ones are goodness and badness—at all.

However, the perceptibility of value may not be so problematic. The first thing to say is that some value may be perceivable and other value not. Perhaps only the value of perceptible things is itself perceptible. There is the danger referred to above, that actions are the primary bearers of moral properties, and that actions cannot be perceived. This is the sort of thing one finds oneself saying if one takes a limited approach to the perceptible. But cannot we perceive the quality of a brush stroke, of the cloth or cut of a suit, of the wine in our glass or of the tone of an instrument? I would take some convincing that these things cannot be seen, felt, tasted or heard, by those competent to do so. The quality of a philosophical argument may yet be unperceivable—if that is any reassurance.

VI

There is one final worry that I want to air. Both Audi and I have written as if the primary form of moral knowledge is, or at least might be, perceptual. But in fact (and I am sure he would not disagree with this) moral deliberation, decision and judgement normally occur prior to action. Since the whole question is whether to act or not, and how to act if one is going to act at all, we cannot be dealing here with anything analogous to perception, because there is nothing yet to perceive. The action has not yet been done and may never be done, if moral judgement decides against it.

Further, perception is always of some particular action or way of acting, whereas decision and judgement address themselves solely to acting in a certain way. One decides to do an act of a certain sort, not to do this particular act. Deciding to act is very different from choosing a chocolate.

The question that worries me is whether our interest in moral perception is at all affected by this fact. Is it that there are two ways of finding out the same fact, the perceptual and the deliberative/intellectual? If so, is this a comfortable arrangement? Is it anything like the relation between seeing that the tin is in the cupboard and working out that that is where it is, perhaps by elimination of alternatives? One difference is in the order of verification. I might check on my decision that the tin is in the cupboard by looking; I would not check on what I see by considering whether there are reasons to suppose that things are as I see them to be, except in special cases. It seems to be the other way round with moral perception. I might easily run an intellectual check on my moral perceptions, and would hardly do it the other way round. I don't say 'Well I reckon it would be wrong, but I will be able to check on that when I have done it because then I'll be able to see whether it is right or wrong.' (Of course, I might need to wait in order to see in more detail whether things pan out as I suppose they will.) In Audi's terms, this would come out as 'Well I reckon it would be wrong, but I will be able to check on that when I have done it because then I'll be able to see whether it is right or wrong by noting whether I am outraged or not.' So there is something fishy here.

It is interesting that the aesthetic case lies on the former side. Someone might judge that a diagonal red slash across this abstract would improve it, but recognize that whether this is really so or not

can only be determined by experience, that is, by adding the slash and looking at the result. Further, it seems that the initial judgement might well be made by imagining the picture with the red slash across it; but this is not how we judge right and wrong. Someone who judges that Caesar should not have crossed the Rubicon and marched on Rome is not likely to do that by imagining being there and asking what their response would be likely to have been in that situation. And in a case where judgement and response fail to match up, I take it that we would often prefer the verdict of judgement to that of response.

This means that our interest in moral perception is not likely to be relevant to moral epistemology in the sort of way that an interest in perception as such is to general epistemology. But that of course does not mean that it has no independent interest at all.

VII

Conclusion. I have suggested that some instantiations of some moral properties are perceptible by some people, namely those competent with the relevant concepts. This is compatible with allowing that there are other moral properties whose instantiations are never perceptible. The distinction between the perceptible and the imperceptible does not map neatly onto the distinction between the moral and the non-moral.⁶

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