

Moral Perception, by Robert Audi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 180

A common thought is that perception's epistemic role in ethics is limited to providing subjects with information about non-moral (though morally relevant) facts. In his Moral Perception, Robert Audi sets out to argue, against this, that ordinary subjects can sometimes be said to perceive the moral qualities of actions and individuals, and that moral perception can directly ground moral knowledge. Audi's is the first book-length treatment of the topic, and is further distinguished by its placing the discussion of moral perception in the context of a comprehensive epistemology and philosophy of mind. It is a rich and thought-provoking work which will engage philosophers from a variety of areas.

Space constraints necessitate a relatively narrow discussion. I will be restricted to briefly summarising and commenting upon Audi's account of moral perception, including the more direct connections between this and his theories of intuition, moral concepts and emotion. In doing so I am neglecting much valuable material, notably, discussion of the epistemology of moral disagreement (Chapter 4), an illuminating comparison of the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics and aesthetics (Chapter 5), and some interesting work on the epistemic and psychological interactions between emotion, intuition, and imagination (Chapters 6 and 7). Readers are recommended to consult this for themselves.

In Chapter 1, Audi presents a causal and representational theory of perception. Roughly, for a subject to perceive an object is for the object to instantiate some set of properties, which in turn 'produces or sustains, in the right way, an appropriate phenomenal representation' (p. 20) of those properties in the subject. On this view, subjects see worldly objects by seeing a subset of their properties.

To accommodate moral perception, in Chapters 2 and 3 Audi supplements this account. Unlike the perception of the physical properties of everyday objects, Audi claims that 'no sensory phenomenal

representation is possible' for moral properties (p. 33). What is sensory phenomenal representation? Audi characterises this as 'cartographic or even pictorial' representation – primarily associated with vision – involving a 'mapping' from phenomenal properties to physical properties of objects (p. 37). All is not lost, however, since Audi thinks the scope of the 'perceptible' (pp. 34-38) outstrips that which can be sensorially represented; there can be perception of moral properties even if the representation is non-sensorial or non-cartographic. Unfortunately, Audi doesn't offer a precise characterisation of non-sensorial representation.

With this distinction made, one might have expected Audi to proceed to argue that moral properties can be non-sensorially represented in perceptual experience (perhaps with the caveat that moral properties are not themselves causal). In doing so he might have appealed to arguments found in the philosophy of perception literature supporting the thesis that high-level properties, such as natural kinds, can be represented in perceptual experience (see, e.g., the method of phenomenal contrast in Siegel, S. The Contents of Visual Experience, Oxford: OUP, 2010).

However, Audi doesn't take this approach. Instead, he presents what I am calling the Integration Model of moral perception ('Integration' for short). This involves what he calls the phenomenal integration (pp. 38-39) of a perception of non-moral base properties (upon which some moral property, e.g., wrongness, is consequential) and some moral 'experiential' or 'phenomenal' element, such as 'a phenomenal sense – which may, but need not, be emotional – of the moral character of the act' (p. 40), an 'intuitive sense of wrongdoing' (p. 43), a nonconceptual 'sense of unfittingness' (p. 46), or a 'perceptual moral seeming' (p. 46). Three things to note: firstly, this list is not exhaustive and may simply involve elaborations of what Audi regards as a single phenomenon: moral phenomenal sensing. Second, Audi suggests that the integration may be partly constituted by a 'felt sense of connection' (p. 39) between the components. Finally, Audi thinks he can accommodate the apparently causal nature of perception since moral phenomenal elements are

‘causally explainable in terms of their basis in the [sensory representation of] natural properties on which moral properties are consequential’ (p. 55). Altogether this apparently yields something worth calling moral perception.

However, without further elaboration, one might doubt that Integration delivers an account of full-blooded moral perception. On one understanding of Integration (as presented by Audi), moral perception at best involves the sensory representation of non-moral base properties, integrated with an ostensibly non-perceptual moral phenomenal experience. Although these experiences may be integrated such that we can speak of one overall moral experience, this is an overall experience of which perception – non-moral perception – is only a component. Indeed, on this interpretation, were Integration to be parachuted into debates about the existence of high-level perception, it would likely be considered a counter-hypothesis to the claim that there is bona fide moral perception.

Assuming this interpretation, Audi may respond as follows: since Integration involves a moral phenomenal element and an overall experience capable of conferring non-inferential justification for moral belief, we are entitled to call it moral perception. To support this point, he might draw a contrast between Integration and an Inferentialist view that most – including Audi (p. 52) – would regard as falling short of moral perception: we perceive non-moral facts and then infer (perhaps implicitly and psychologically immediately) a moral belief from this perception together with at least one background moral belief. With Inferentialism we lack the experiential element and immediate justification many associate with perception. Integration, on the other hand, does possess these features.

There are, however, two things worth noting that make the contrast between Integration and Inferentialism less stark: firstly, an Inferentialist might accommodate the supposedly necessary phenomenal element of moral perception by claiming that epistemically inferential moral perceptual judgments have an associated phenomenology, and can themselves be integrated with non-moral

perception. Secondly, and more importantly, although Integration may deliver non-inferential justification, it does not appear to be purely perceptual justification. Indeed, with Integration, moral perceptual belief appears epistemically dependent on ostensibly non-perceptual sources, i.e., moral phenomenal sensing. This arguably makes it epistemically similar to moral beliefs as conceived on Inferentialism.

To develop this epistemological point further, consider what appears to be Audi's considered view on why we should think that moral perception is epistemically reliable. Roughly, someone who has an adequate grasp of a moral concept, e.g., MORAL WRONGNESS, will have dispositions to have appropriate moral phenomenal responses (of the sort involved in Integration, however we understand it) upon perceptually apprehending non-moral base properties in particular moral scenarios (see, especially, pp. 101-2 and p. 118). The relevant point of interest here is that the epistemic credentials of moral phenomenal responses are plausibly derivative of subject's grasping ostensibly synthetic a priori entailments between moral properties and their non-moral grounds, which will presumably be a non-empirical matter. Hence, if we assume Audi's considered view, moral perceptual knowledge looks to be crucially dependent upon substantive non-empirical knowledge.

Audi might respond by claiming that the knowledge of the entailments between moral properties and their non-moral grounds is empirical, in which case the worry about non-empirical knowledge dissipates. Note, however, that this might lead to a different problem: if empirical knowledge of these entailments is inferential then this would suggest that moral perceptual knowledge is, ultimately, a sort of inferential knowledge which is at odds with the sort of intuitionist position Audi wants to defend.

At this stage, we should perhaps consider whether there is an alternative way of construing Integration such that it yields experiences that (i) are less tenuously perceptual, and relatedly, (ii)

aren't epistemically dependent on non-empirical sources. The suggestion I have in mind is that what Audi calls 'Integration' be understood as akin to what philosophers of perception call cognitive penetration (see, e.g., Macpherson, F. 'Cognitive Penetration of Colour Experience: Rethinking the Issue in Light of An Indirect Mechanism', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 84 (1): 24-62, 2012): very roughly, the modification of perceptual representational content by states in the subject's cognitive system, where this can include, e.g., beliefs, desires, emotions, and intuitions. Nothing that Audi says in Moral Perception rules out this interpretation (see, especially, fn 7 on p. 16 - thanks to Pekka Vayrynen for pointing this out to me). On this view, Integration involves moral phenomenal sensing modifying the representational content of the non-moral perceptual experience. This needn't involve sensory representation, but would involve perception coming to phenomenally represent moral properties, which is arguably the sort of thing we are looking for.

Note, however, that opting for this model requires that reasons be provided for thinking that cognitive penetration of this sort occurs, and that moral properties are admissible contents of perceptual experience. It would have aided Audi's argument in Moral Perception had he engaged with the growing literature on these topics (one might raise a similar point about Audi's discussion of emotion (Ch. 6), where he neglects to discuss some key positions in the philosophy of emotion which are relevant to his overall position, e.g., Peter Goldie's feeling towards view of affective intentionality (see The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration, Oxford: OUP, 2000) and Michael Brady's account (Emotional Insight, Oxford: OUP, 2013) of the epistemic role of emotion as promoting the discovery of reasons). Audi only speaks to these sorts of issues when he says: 'I see no good reason not to speak of moral perception if we can speak of facial perception and perception of anger' (p. 59). However, as far as I can tell, Audi doesn't provide reasons for thinking that, e.g., anger, is an admissible content of perceptual experience, and it is anyway unclear what support this would provide for the claim that moral properties can be perceptually represented.

Suppose, however, that we do adopt this more robustly perceptual interpretation of Integration. Does it avoid non-empirical epistemic dependence? On this model of Integration, moral perception is causally dependent on moral phenomenal sensing. However, there is arguably a good case to be made for thinking that, so characterised, moral perception may also be epistemically dependent on the epistemic status of the penetrating states (see, e.g., Cowan, R., ‘Perceptual Intuitionism’, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 87 (1), 2013). The upshot: even if moral perception non-inferentially justifies, it may still be dependent on non-empirical sources (in the way described above).

This isn’t really a criticism of Audi’s overall position as much as it is a caveat: those coming to Moral Perception looking for an account clearly free of a commitment to non-empirical epistemic sources should be left disappointed. However, this need not and should not deter anyone from reading what is both an important extension of Audi’s metaethical position and a highly valuable contribution to the moral epistemology literature more generally.

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