INTUITION, PERCEPTION, AND MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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The Problem of Moral Intuitions

An unresolved and perhaps intractable problem in moral epistemology is the problem of conflicts between reflective (or considered) moral intuitions: two equally well-informed, open-minded, rationally and logically coherent, openly critical, theoretically explicit, and emotionally sensitive persons can take differing positions regarding the morality of an action or trait due to different intuitions (or feelings or basic beliefs) about the action or trait. The problem appears to be intractable because no further *rational* appeal can be made; although one might hope for a conceptual or empirical breakthrough, no further concepts, experiences, information, or arguments seem reasonably likely to resolve the dispute. Contemporary examples are replete: killing highly sentient animals for food, preserving wilderness areas, and the moral status of human fetuses, to name a few. When social circumstances necessitate resolving such disputes and both parties are equally convinced of the morality of their intuitions, historically all too often the dispute has been resolved by power and violence—the gallows, the stake, or the battlefield.

Although not explicitly addressing the problem as I have defined it, Michael R. Depaul's model of moral perception (*Journal of Philosophy* 85 [October 1988]: 552-65) may resolve it. What I do in this paper is examine the extent to which Depaul's model acceptably resolves the Problem of Moral Intuitions.

Depaul's Model of Moral Perception

Depaul believes that we have a faculty of moral perception and judgment roughly analogous to our faculties of sense perception and judgment. The moral faculty can be uneducated, immature, and "naive." Just as sensory faculties

must mature and be trained in order to make judgments, especially refined judgments, such as discriminating among fine wines, the moral faculty must be educated and trained by experience. And, just as sensory faculties can be hampered and distorted by certain types of experiences, the moral faculty can be "corrupted." In the case of naiveté, the moral faculty needs to experience more—to be trained and guided—in order to perceive and judge correctly; but, in the case of corruption, the moral faculty has perceived and experienced too much, perhaps permanently and irreparably inhibiting its ability to make correct judgments.

In what seems to me to be roughly comparable to G. E. Moore's ethical naturalism, Depaul claims that good and bad, right and wrong, are realistically *in* the phenomena but not as "simple qualities" like Moore maintained (see 561). Rather, the phenomena form a complex Gestalt that actually is either good or bad, right or wrong, and this moral Gestalt is what is perceived, assimilated, and judged by the moral faculty. Moral perceivers are analogous to wine connoisseurs or equestrians who must have a considerable amount of training and experience in order to perceive the refined subtleties of the wine's Gestalt or the horse's motions.

In his article, Depaul's main concern is moral epistemology, and his main explicit claim is that experiences provide "warrants" for moral knowledge. The difference between *mere* moral beliefs and moral *knowledge* is that moral knowledge results when beliefs are both justified (or "warranted") and true. Clearly implied by his moral realism, a "true" belief for Depaul would be one that fits the moral Gestalt of the actual phenomena. Even though he does not explicitly use the following two terms, he seems to conceive of "basic" perceptions as providing the "foundation" for ethics. Although Depaul reserves a significant second-level role for logic and argument, as I explain below, the epistemological status of a moral claim depends on at least two foundational factors: (1) a competent moral faculty, and (2) true basic beliefs (or intuitions) perceived (or judged) by that faculty (563-64). The immature moral faculty needs experiences in

order to become competent, and moral beliefs are warranted (or justified) by perception. Experiences provide "input," which often includes additional information; and, they also "alter" the moral faculty making it function differently, thereby yielding different "output," which would be true when it correctly fits the moral Gestalt and false when it does not.

Much of Depaul's article criticizes what he calls the "intellectualist" view of ethics, which is the approach "almost all contemporary philosophers share" (552). This orthodox, mainline tradition conceives of moral inquiry as the examination of arguments: moral arguments are analyzed in regard to concepts, propositions, logic, evidence, and the interrelationships of these. Regarding moral knowledge, the intellectualist view of warranted moral belief is:

> . . . our moral beliefs will be warranted just in case we can construct *arguments* that are strong enough to transfer sufficient *warrant* from the relevant *facts* and *logical* truths. (558, emphasis added)

Although experiences count in the intellectualist approach, they merely provide information. Disputes are resolved—if they are ever resolved—by appeal to arguments, logic, and facts.

Depaul does not totally reject the intellectualist method but finds it significantly deficient. He defends the astonishingly extreme claim that ". . . we can make no progress in understanding . . . the epistemology of our moral beliefs . . . until we stop trying to force things into the mold supplied by the intellectualist" (563). Depaul's strategy is to expose the inadequacy of the intellectualist view by showing its failure to explain paradigm cases of corruption and naiveté. Briefly, these two cases are as follows:

> THE NAIVE DEVELOPER exploits land for economic gain and does not feel that unspoiled wilderness is valuable. He values high yields and minimum labor. He has never raised a garden, visited a farm, or hiked in the mountains.

Moreover, he has incorporated his values ". . . into a coherent system of moral beliefs, thereby becoming immune to any efforts to argue him out of his views" (554).

THE CORRUPT SEXIST read a trashy romance novel while he was young and thereby came to think that women want to be dominated and roughly treated. These feelings and thoughts were further examined and reinforced by lots of movies, plays, poems, novels, essays, and personal experiences. "The end result is that the young man's moral judgments regarding appropriate relations between men and women are thoroughly fouled up" (557).

Depaul argues that, if the intellectualist appoach were accurate and adequate, corruption should be able to be altered by correcting bad evidence, faulty logic, or poor theory. But this is not the case: corruption can be permanent. Moreover, the intellectualist explanation of naiveté is too simplistic. If the intellectualist approach were accurate and adequate, naiveté should be able to be altered by supplying new, additional information and alternative conceptions. Again, this is not the case:

> The interesting case of naiveté, however, is one where the person has a coherent and comprehensive system of moral, philosophical and empirical beliefs supporting his moral judgments. The person has no belief one could use to argue him out of his other beliefs. In order to disrupt such a person's settled convictions and force him out of his naiveté, the person must be brought to have additional experiences. (560-61)

Based on the failure of the intellectualist model to account for naiveté and corruption, Depaul endorses his perceptual model as more comprehensively and accurately accounting for the phenomena. In the case of naiveté, the moral faculty has not developed and matured, and hence it needs additional

experiences—and perhaps skilled guidance and disciplined practice—in order to develop the requisite perceptual and judicial moral capacities. In the case of corruption, the person has had too many experiences, perhaps too many of the wrong kind or too few of the right kind, but some of them have warped the moral faculty making it incapable of accurately perceiving the moral Gestalt. In both cases, the additional experiences have two effects: (1) they provide additional input (data and information), and (2) they alter the nature of the moral faculty, enhancing or distorting its perceptual and judicial capacities.

As I stated earlier, Depaul does not completely reject intellectualism but argues that it needs supplemented by perceptualism. In Depaul's perceptualism, intellectualist-type argument, evidence, logic, and theory are still used:

> In my view, we can go farther in our efforts to understand moral inquiry if we adopt a perceptual model rather than the argument-based model proffered by the intellectualist. If we take this model seriously, philosophical inquiry into morality will take on a rather different appearance. Although there will obviously be a place for argument, explanation, and theory construction, there must also be a prominent place for literature, music, and art and for philosophical reflections on these. To the dismay of many philosophers, there will be a greater role for intuition, but perhaps this will be tempered by more thought being given to the development of intuition. (565)

It would seem to follow from Depaul's theory that, in a strong sense, persons actually can be mistaken about basic moral intuitions; and, consequently, Depaul's model provides a plausible solution to the Problem of Moral Intuitions. I now turn to an assessment of the extent to which Depaul's perceptual model resolves this problem.

Moral Perceptualism and Intuitions

It seems to me that Depaul's analysis of intellectualist ethics helps us understand why intractable moral dilemmas and disagreements sometimes result: both sides in a dispute can have fully informed, conceptually clear, rationally coherent, and theoretically well-formed positions. Admittedly, sometimes disputes are resolved by the analytic methods of conceptual clarity, logical rigor, and theoretical consistency. But we all know of cases where utilitarians and Kantians lock horns and, after all the analytic ink is spilled, end up agreeing to disagree about basic, intuitive values and principles. Although analytic intellectualists sometimes appeal to intuitions, feelings, and sentiments, they usually do so only as a last resort and, more importantly, without any expectation for consensus because intuitions, feelings, and sentiments are considered to be subjective, culturally conditioned, and relative. In such cases of genuine disagreement, the analytic intellectualist method can dispell uncritical and unreflective relativism (which is often pejoratively labelled "mindless" relativism) and thereby make explicit one's intuitions and considered moral judgments, but intellectualism cannot overcome critical and reflective relativism since intellectualism has no means for resolving disagreements about basic moral intuitions and sentiments.

Perceptualism would appear to resolve the Problem of Moral Intuitions: anyone who makes an incorrect intuitive moral perception would be mistaken because they have gotten the Gestalt wrong, often getting it wrong because they are either naive or corrupt. The case of mistaken moral perception is closely analogous to color blindness: the color blind are clearly mistaken because the colors are actually there. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of normal observers always see the colors, and we have highly confirmed scientific theories of electromagnetic radiation and ophthalmology that give detailed explanations of the phenomena. Despite the need for color discrimination in our modern cities with their color-coded gadgets, fortunately in the state of nature color perception can be rather inexact, otherwise our color-blind

friends would have been eliminated by natural selection. Involved in both the moral perception claim (namely, perception of the moral Gestalt) and in the color blindness claim (namely, perception of color) are at least four epistemic factors: (1) the public nature of the phenomena; (2) what a "normal" perceiver is; (3) natural selection of the perceptual faculties (that is, evolutionary epistemology and axiology); and (4) theoretical matters concerning detail, coherency, and confirmability. These four factors make "perception" far from simple, which is perhaps one of the reasons why Depaul rejects Moore's "simple qualities" and favors Gestalt realism. Because I do not have space to discuss all of these factors, I will only consider the last one.

Our epistemic certainty regarding color blindness is at least partly a product of our highly developed empirical and scientific theories. Surely the same holds for so-called "basic" or "intuitive" moral perceptions since moral intuitions differ far more radically than sensory ones. Moreover, the fact of culturally relative moral intuitions provides a close analogy to scientific theory-ladenness: just as scientific data are generated by theory because we focus our attention on those data (for example, Milliken's famous oil-drop experiment), similarly the moral Gestalt is seen differently by persons with differing moral "theories," which may be totally unconscious and unexamined. Because we usually in intellectualist fashion consider a "theory" to be explicit, clear, and coherent, I perhaps should not call these implicit moral networks "theories." Regardless of the label, my point is this: percepts are often generated by concepts. Unknown to the unwary observer, perceptions can be theory-generated and theory-contaminated. Psychologists, notably Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, have gathered convincing evidence that what most people morally perceive is usually controlled by networks of unconscious conventional beliefs. If we value self-determination and autonomy, we should make those theories explicit. Moreover, prejudices, biases, and superstitions are types of unexamined beliefs that elicit strong moral perceptions, albeit those that Depaul would call naive or

corrupt. But, unless Depaul begs the question by already having a moral *theory* in mind, how can he *know* that the perceptions are mistaken? Since perceptions are theory-generated and since theories are warranted by perceptions, it would seem to follow that theories and perceptions must be "warranted" together as wholistic nexuses that do not have pure, untainted "basic" beliefs and foundations.

Gestalt realism helps resolve the Problem of Moral Intuitions only if the moral Gestalt has one and only one correct perception (or interpretation). I am thinking here of Wittgenstein's notorious duck-rabbit that can be legitimately seen as either a duck or a rabbit. Some people see only the duck; whereas, some see only the rabbit. Fortunately, I can see both, but unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately for my sanity) I can see only one at a time. Although it easily confuses and tricks our perceptions, the duck-rabbit is not perceptually complex; but, in contrast, moral dilemmas usually are exceedingly complex. And like the duck-rabbit, they may have more than one *correct* perception. Not only does this help explain why different people have differing intuitions, but it also helps explain how the same person at different times can have different feelings about the same moral issue. An example of the latter is the different and seemingly incompatible intuitions the same person can have toward abortion, at one moment feeling that it is wrong while focusing on the innocence of the fetus, but at the next moment feeling that it is right while focusing on the rights of the woman. As with the duck-rabbit, our perceptions flip-flop depending on our focus. And like the duck-rabbit, some people can only perceive one side of the issue. When a Gestalt can be seen two ways but never both ways at the same time, can we conclude without begging the question that one is wrong and other right? I do not think so, at least not unless we already have good reasons for preferring one Gestalt over the other, which would seem to entail that we already have at least a tacit moral theory at work.

Conclusion

Despite the initial plausibility, Depaul's perceptual model does not resolve the Problem of Moral Intuitions. My criticisms of Depaul's theory do not refute it but rather indicate the complexity of moral discourse. Although he defends the priority of his perceptual model, he explicitly acknowledges the importance of analytic ethics. The aspect of his approach that I reject, which is an aspect not explicit in his text, is his tacit tendency to base ethics upon a natural, realistic *foundation*, which I likened above to Moore's ethical naturalism. I have argued that ethics is a foundationless "Gestalt" wholism that includes both perception and theory. Because percepts are theory-generated and because theories are percept-warranted, perceptions and theories must be justified as metaethical wholes. Warranting is not simplistically and reductionistically a matter of examining basic beliefs (or intuitions) and therefrom generating a coherent theory: the two generate each other in a wholistic nexus.

Depaul's perceptual model presents numerous intriguing possibilities for exploring other perplexing moral issues, such as, the difficulties generated by psychological and sociological conditioning, moral education, moral luck, praise, blame, punishment, noncognitivism, discrimination, elitism, and the moral role of the arts, literature, and religion. Since the value of moral theories is measured in part by their fruitfulness, his promises to be significant.