What (if anything) is Moral Experience?

Sarah McGrath

5/23/25 Draft for The Aristotelian Society

> Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had claimed for it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of character, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience... All that it really demonstrated was that our future would be the same as our past, and that the sin we had done once, and with loathing, we would do many times, and with joy.— Lord Wotton in Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

I. Introduction

What (if anything) is moral experience? "Moral experience" is not a familiar pre-theoretical term. We understand, "I have a lot of babysitting experience" and "how did you enjoy your dining experience?" but not: "I have a lot of moral experience," and "how did you enjoy your moral experience?" Nor is "moral experience" a familiar *post*-theoretical term. Whereas philosophers largely agree on what they mean by "perceptual experience", "visual experience," "illusory experience," they have yet to converge on a shared theoretical understanding of "moral experience." In his 1955 *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* Maurice Mandelbaum takes moral experience to be, roughly, the experience of moral demands, which we feel when we make a moral judgment:

> The phenomenon of a reflexive demand...the feeling of being called on to do this or refrain from doing that...the demands which we experience when we make a direct moral judgment... experienced as emanating from 'outside' us, and as being directed against us...which seem to be independent of us and to which we feel that we ought to respond.

In his (1998) "The Axiology of Moral Experience," Robert Audi argues that while "[I]t is perhaps not obvious that the plausible candidates for moral experience amount to more than experiences that are in some way morally significant," there are in fact experiences which are distinctively moral, and so deserve the name "moral experience." These experiences include, in the first instance, moral emotions:

> Moral emotion is what may first come to mind as a candidate for moral experience...Consider aroused indignation, say, where one sees a lazy student copying from the examination paper of a conscientious peer. One not only disapproves, one experiences the act with felt indignation and with an awareness of it as, say, violating a moral rule. (Audi 1998: 356)

By contrast, in his 2006 "Moral Philosophy and the Aetiology of Moral Experience," Garrett Cullity appears to take to use "moral experience" interchangeably with "moral judgment" itself, rather than with moral emotions, or with the phenomenology of moral experience.

Eric Wiland takes moral experience to be whatever kind of experience confers moral expertise, and argues that, so conceived, "the prevalent philosophical view of the nature of moral experience" is that moral experience consists in "encounters with the good." (Wiland 2021: 90-99)

In "Moral Experience: Its Existence, Describability, and Significance," Uriah Kriegel (2021) takes it that moral experiences would be "moral mental states in which there is something it is like to be." (4) This specification leads him to a view that is similar to Audi's: "moral emotions [including, e.g., guilt, shame,

repentance; respect, pride, compassion] represent the most promising candidate moral experiences" because they "have phenomenal character, are routinely felt, and thus occur consciously."

By contrast, James Hutton (2022) explicitly defines moral experience by reference to the role that experience would play in justifying moral judgment on a view he calls "moral empiricism."

> The moral empiricist claims that there are cases in which agents form moral beliefs non-inferentially and *a posteriori*. 'Moral experience' refers to whatever mental state these non-inferential, *a posteriori* moral beliefs are based on.

When I asked Google's AI feature what moral experience is, it told me:

> A moral experience is **a subjective, lived encounter where an individual perceives their values being upheld or violated, often within the context of everyday situations**. It involves interpreting events and actions through a moral lens, judging them as right or wrong, good or bad. These experiences can occur in mundane settings, not just in ethically fraught situations. (emphasis original)

This seems to reflect how "moral experience" is used in the medical ethics literature. (See, for example, Hunt and Carnevale 2011)

This paper asks: what, if anything, is moral experience? Should we be skeptical that there is such a thing? Or is there a useful, theoretically unified role for something called "moral experience" to play in moral epistemology? In setting things up in this way, we leave open the possibility that the answer is "no", and that moral epistemology would do better to eschew talk of moral experience. One motivation for asking this question has to do with singular moral knowledge—non-inferential knowledge involving token events or particular people. Singular moral knowledge is important, but it is often underemphasized and overlooked in our moral theorizing. It is important at least in part because it can cause us to revise *a priori* intuition in various ways—for example, when you come to know that a particular type of behavior, which you previously took to be morally unobjectionable, is wrong, by witnessing a particular event of that type.
It is underemphasized and overlooked at least in part because the moral judgments that are often referred to as 'judgments about cases' (as opposed to 'judgments about general principles') are often judgments about *types* of cases, as opposed to judgments about token cases.[1] For example: 'Suppose that one could save the lives of the five triage patients, by harvesting the organs of one healthy patient…' Our judgments about what it would be permissible or impermissible to do in the circumstances are often judgments about the truth of general principles (e.g., 'It would be morally wrong to sacrifice the innocent bystander in such circumstances'). These judgments are less general than sweeping general principles such as the principle of utility, but they are general all the same. If singular moral knowledge is an important part of our evidence, or "what we have to go on," in moral theorizing, and singular moral judgment is non-inferential and immediate, then this generates at least some theoretical pressure to understand the way or ways in which these judgments are justified.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II argues that we should distinguish the question of whether we have moral experiences from the question of whether and to what extent moral knowledge is informed by experience. Section III distinguishes different kinds of experience, so as to clarify the kind of experience that is the topic of the titular question. Sections IV and V critically examine two of the job descriptions that theorists have offered for moral experience in the recent literature. In section VI, I marshal a lesson from the previous sections to build an improved job description: moral experience is experience that presents morally significant features in a privileged way. I argue that the mental states that might play this role are perceptual states with an affective assist. In section VII, I argue that the improved job description enables us

[1] As (Kagan 2001) emphasizes.

to respond to two nagging objections to views on which moral experiences are affective states—objections that depended for their force on features of the old job descriptions. And in section VIII, I briefly indicate some of the theoretical roles that moral experience might be able to play.

II. "Moral Experience" vs. Moral Knowledge from Experience

What is the relationship between the question of whether there are moral experiences and the question of whether perceptual experience informs moral knowledge? Historically, the question of whether we have *a posteriori* moral knowledge has been taken to be a question about whether *non*-moral experience—ordinary sensory experience—informs moral knowledge. As morality has by and large been taken to be an *a priori* domain, empiricism about moral knowledge has not been a popular position, even among empiricists. But in the last half century at least, the views on which experience plays important roles in moral epistemology have become more mainstream. Naturalist realists of the 1980's took it that moral facts were part of the natural world and as such could play explanatory roles. More recently, there has come to be a substantial literature defending and expounding the view that we have at least some moral knowledge by perception.[2] There is a growing trend to see moral knowledge as social knowledge: the majority view in the literature on moral deference and moral expertise appears to be that at least some moral knowledge is knowledge acquired from testimony, or otherwise absorbed from the social environment. According to the *moral anti-exceptionalist*, any source of non-moral knowledge is also a potential source of moral knowledge, and a fortiori that experience can inform moral knowledge in any of the ways that it can inform non-moral knowledge.[3]

In this section, I argue that the question of whether and how experience informs moral knowledge is orthogonal to the question of whether there is any such thing as "moral experience." Someone who thinks that moral beliefs can be confirmed/disconfirmed by experience might deny that there is any such thing as "moral experience." Conversely, someone who denies moral beliefs can be confirmed/disconfirmed by sensory experience might think that there are "moral experiences."

To take the first direction first: suppose that you agree with Peter Railton that where there is social unrest, this is evidence that a society is unjust. If this view is correct, then non-moral experience—experience of social unrest—can confirm a moral belief—the belief that the society is unjust. But it does not follow that the experience of social unrest is a *moral* experience. On a natural understanding of Railton's point, what is given in the experience is strictly non-moral, and the interesting philosophical upshot is supposed to be that non-moral experience can confirm moral claims by inference to the best explanation.

Conversely, one could hold that while non-moral experience is *in*capable of confirming or disconfirming moral beliefs, there is such a thing as moral experience which can play this confirming/disconfirming role. It is natural to understand Gilbert Harman's position in Chapter 1 of "Ethics and Observation" as a version of this latter position. According to Harman, the important difference between morality and science is that scientific principles, unlike moral principles, can be confirmed/disconfirmed by observation. By "observation," Harman means experience of non-moral events. But Harman would allow that there are "moral experiences." Given his commitment to the view that "all observation is theory-laden," Harman takes it that anyone whose outlook is informed by a moral sensibility might literally see that a particular action is wrong:

> ...if you hold a moral view, whether it is held consciously or unconsciously, you will be able to perceive rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, justice or injustice....If we say that

[2] See for example (McGrath 2004) (McGrath 2018) (Werner 2020).
[3] See (McGrath 2020)(Williamson 2025).

> observation has occurred whenever an opinion is a direct result of perception, we must allow that there is moral observation, because such an opinion can be a moral opinion as easily as any other sort. In this sense, observation may be used to confirm or disconfirm moral theories. (1977: 5)

On Harman's view, only moral observation can confirm/disconfirm moral theories. The central point at issue between Harman and naturalist moral realists is that of whether *non*-moral observation can ever confirm a moral belief; crucially, the issue is not whether a moral observation could ever confirm/disconfirm a moral belief. On the most natural way of glossing his view, Harman thinks that there are moral experiences, moral experiences can confirm moral theories, but moral theory is cut off from the kind of experience that plays a crucial evidential role in science.

That the issue of whether experience informs moral knowledge is orthogonal to the question of whether there is moral experience can be further supported by analogy with discussions of religious experience. Consider a proponent of the argument from design: she believes that facts about design-like complexity in nature confirm the existence of God. She therefore believes that non-religious observation confirms religious beliefs. But from the fact that she thinks that experience confirms the existence of God, we cannot infer that she thinks that anybody ever has "religious experience." Similarly, someone could pray for a particular outcome, and when she observes that outcome materialize, take this as confirming her belief in God. But if the outcome she has prayed for is some empirically observable outcome such as the improvement of her spouse's health, then the experience of the outcome materializing is not a religious experience, but rather, an ordinary empirical one which she takes to confirm the religious belief. Conversely, someone could reject the from argument design, and more generally, the idea that empirical observation provides evidence for religious belief, while maintaining that the only kind of evidence for such a being would be direct evidence: "religious experiences" which present supernatural content.

III. Résumé experience vs. Impressions

"Experience" is ambiguous between (what I will call) *résumé experience* and (what I will call) *impressions*. Résumé experience is the kind of experience that you can potentially list on your résumé to provide evidence as to your level of expertise under the heading, "Experience." It is the kind of experience at issue when someone asks you how much babysitting experience, or teaching experience, or managerial experience that you have. It is experience *at* doing something—at some activity, practice, occupation, or discipline. And these kinds of experience can be listed on a résumé because potential employers think that practicing a particular kind of activity tends to confer some level of expertise at that activity. When we are inquiring about résumé experience, we tend to ask "how much" rather than "how many," and how much you *have* (rather than how many you *have had*). What I am calling résumé experience is a special case of what Michael Hinton's called 'the ordinary biographical sense' of experience. (Hinton 1973) Experiences in the ordinary biographical sense are "events of which one is subject"—including not only activities one participated in but also what one witnessed (as in "The eclipse was such a bizarre experience.") Ordinary biographical experience is what Lord Wotton is talking about in the epigraph. Hinton contrasts the ordinary biographical sense of experience with "the philosophical sense"—what I am calling impressions.

Impressions—so-called in honor of Hume—are not experiences *at* various activities but rather experiences *of* certain content. This is what philosophers of mind are talking about when they speak of visual, auditory, or hallucinatory experience. Experiences in this sense present the world to be a certain way; they have representational content. To have a visual experience is to passively undergo an event, rather than to actively engage in some practice. You do not list visual experience on your résumé.

Corresponding to the distinction between résumé experience and impressions, there are two distinct ways in which experience can make us epistemically better off. Résumé experience can make us epistemically better off by *tending to confer expertise*. The reason why we are interested in how much babysitting experience

someone has is that we tend to think that as a general rule, more experience at exercising a skill or practicing an activity will make you better at it. Of course, not all practice at a given activity confers expertise or improves judgment. But the general pertinence of past practice to presumed expertise largely explains why experience is listed on a résumé. In the first instance, impressions make us epistemically better off by *directly justifying beliefs.* Perceptual experience directly justifies perceptual belief; color experience directly justifies beliefs about color. If there are religious experiences, they are supposed to be experiences that directly justify religious belief.

How are the two kinds of experience related? Of course, if you want to know everything about F, and there are F-impressions, then you should undergo some F-impressions, since knowing what it is like to undergo F-impressions is part of knowing everything about F. With respect to some kinds of expertise, knowing what the relevant impressions are like might be especially important: for example, knowing what various wine impressions are like might be especially important to accruing wine expertise. Having many impressions of baseball pitches might be especially important to being a baseball scout. But not all F-expertise involves familiarity with F impressions. Experts at particle physics have had lots of experience doing particle physics, without having had any particle physics impressions.

If there is such a thing as moral experience, is it résumé experience, or impressions? In what follows, I will be focusing on the question of whether there are moral experiences in the sense of moral impressions: some kind of representational mental state that deserves to be called moral. Perhaps this is obvious—too obvious to bother clarifying. But I emphasize the distinction for two reasons. First, there is a perfectly good question of whether there is moral experience in the résumé sense: it is the question of whether there is a practice or activity that makes us better at being moral, or confers moral expertise. What kind of practice or activity would that be? Aristotle is optimistic that past experience of acting virtuously will makes us better off at acting virtuously in the future. The virtuous person will cultivate a sense of pleasure at doing the right thing, and this sense of pleasure can play an epistemic role. This sense of pleasure will help hone her judgment as to which act is the virtuous act in future situations. For example: standing firmly in the face of danger, or standing loyally by one's friends, or charitably offering assistance (just the fitting amount) to others.[4] Acting virtuously seems to have as good a claim as any to being a kind of moral activity that stands in a privileged relationship to moral expertise. But I want to set these questions aside in order to focus on the question of whether there are moral experiences in the sense of moral impressions.

The second reason why I explicitly distinguish between these different senses of experience is that some scholars take moral experience to be experience in something like the résumé sense.[5] And as we will see in the next section, some discussions of moral experience in the literature seem to run the different kinds of experience together.

IV. Moral Experience as Experience of the Good

[4] Perhaps there are other natural candidates for what moral résumé experience could be. Answering difficult ethical questions in an ethics advice column? Teaching *Introduction to Moral Philosophy*? My own feeling about this is that, while practicing these activities tends to be an indication of some kind of moral expertise, it seems to be an indication of expertise at *practicing these very activities*, rather than moral experience per se. Thus, to say these practitioners have "moral experience" rather than experience at writing moral advice columns or at teaching moral philosophy" seems obfuscatory.

[5] In the literature on nursing ethics, "moral experience" seems to refer to experience in the résumé sense. See, for example, (Basanta et al. 2022; Elmore, Wright, and Paradis 2018)

In his recent book about moral deference, Eric Wiland suggests that we use "moral experience" to mean experience "that can serve as the basis of moral expertise." (Wiland 2021: 91) This makes it sound as though we should use "moral experience" to refer to a kind of résumé experience, since résumé experience is the kind of experience that tends to confer moral expertise. But Wiland's central candidates for the kind of experience that confer moral expertise appear to be impressions. Wiland draws from John Stuart Mill's idea of a "higher pleasure test" to develop the idea that moral experiences are "experiences of the good." As is familiar, Mill famously argues that "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure." (1861/2001: 8-9.) Wiland suggests that these experiences of pleasure—"experiences of the good"—are the kinds of experiences that confer moral expertise, insofar as they enable one to judge which kinds of pleasures matter more. But, he argues, we should expand this idea so that "experiences of the bad"—experiences of different kind of pain and suffering—are just as relevant to expertise as "experiences of the good." "Moral experience," then, refers to impressions of various kinds of pleasure and suffering that enable one to evaluate the relative value and disvalue of these different experiences. Wiland's idea might be described as the view that "moral experiences" are *impressions of especially morally relevant factors*, which confer moral expertise by familiarizing one with the character of those factors.

We agreed above that knowing what it is like to have certain kinds of impressions can be relevant to acquiring certain kinds of expertise. The wine expert, for example, will presumably seek to taste many different kinds of wine, so as to be able to compare the relative merits of the different types. But it is a stretch to say that experiences of pleasure and pain are types of impression that stand to moral expertise as wine tasting stands to wine expertise. Of course it is true that experience of pleasure and pain can familiarize a subject with what it is like to experience those pleasures and pains, and thereby to compare them qualitatively. But while expertise at the various qualities of pleasures an pains may be an important input to moral judgment, it is unclear that its relationship with moral expertise is tight enough that this type of experience counts as distinctively moral. Breaking a toe, going to the dentist, and experiencing the loss of a loved one are all painful experiences. But are they all moral experiences? On the positive side, drinking fine wine, reading philosophy, playing exciting video games or having a laugh with friends...these are all pleasurable experiences. But to call all of them moral experiences is to use "moral experience" too expansively. There need be nothing distinctively moral about them.

At this point, I want to tentatively put forward a general hypothesis. The general hypothesis is that there is no interesting category of non-moral impressions that "serves as the basis of" moral expertise. Impressions of how your actions have made people feel, of how your endeavors have turned out, of how the actions of others have turned out, all seem to be impressions that are potentially relevant to gaining moral knowledge and a more reliable moral judge. But if we deem all impressions of non-moral factors that are potentially morally relevant "moral experiences" conflating the two issues separated above: the issue of whether experience confers moral knowledge and the issue of whether there are distinctively moral experiences.

V. Moral Experience as Whatever Justifies Non-Inferential Moral Judgment

A natural thought is that if there is such a thing as moral experience, then moral experience is whatever mental state stands to *a posteriori*, non-inferential moral belief as perceptual experience stands to *a posteriori* empirical belief. So, suppose you witness one of your colleagues harshly upbraiding a student in the hallway, and you spontaneously judge, "that was cruel." Whatever type of mental state justifies your immediate, non-inferential moral judgment that what the speaker did was cruel is the type of mental state

that deserves to be called "moral experience."[6] Since we are looking for a mental state which plays the role of directly justifying moral belief, we are taking moral experiences to be impressions. What are the leading candidate mental states to play the role specified by this job description?

One salient possibility is that the state that non-inferentially justifies your *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgment is a perceptual experience—more specifically, a visual experience. A second possibility is that the state that non-inferentially justifies your *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgment is an emotion. And a third possibility is that the state that non-inferentially justifies you're *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgment is an intuition.

But we needn't go into the prospects for these candidates at this juncture, because setting the issue up in this way involves making an important mistake. That is, we should reject the job description on which moral experience is whatever justifies *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgment. The reason why I believe that this is a bad job description is that to say that a judgment is a *moral* judgment is to specify something about its *content*, not about its justification. (Compare: to say that a judgment is an *a posteriori* judgment is to say something about its justification, not its content.) And, in general, the fact that a belief has a certain type of *content* doesn't imply that it must be justified in any particular way.

Here are some examples that illustrate the point. From the fact that a non-inferential belief has *color* content, we cannot infer that it is justified by, say, a visual experience. My belief that you are wearing your blue shirt today *might* be non-inferentially justified by a visual experience of you in your blue shirt. But, assuming (albeit controversially) that testimony is a source of non-inferential justification, my belief that you are wearing your blue shirt today could be non-inferentially justified by your texting me to that effect. Similarly, from the fact that a belief has gustatory content, we cannot infer that it is justified by a gustatory experience: a non-inferential belief with gustatory content, such as "this pretzel is salty," could either be justified by a gustatory experience–that is, by the experience of tasting it– or by a visual experience with salty looks. Assuming that visual experience is not gustatory experience, it would be a mistake to say that gustatory experience is whatever justifies non-inferential belief with gustatory content.

But then we should not agree that moral experience is whatever justifies non-inferential belief with moral content. Beliefs with moral content can be non-inferentially justified by different types of mental state.[7]

We can use this point to critique Hutton's argument that moral experiences are emotions, rather than perceptual experiences. Again, according to Hutton, "moral experience" is whatever justifies non-inferential moral belief. What kind of experience plays the role of justifying non-inferential moral belief? We are assuming for the sake of argument that this question has a unique answer, because we are assuming that there is one type of experience that justifies non-inferential moral belief. The two contenders Hutton considers are:

> **Perceptual Intuitionism**: moral experiences are perceptual experiences with moral content.
> **Emotional Intuitionism**: moral experiences are emotions. (2022: 571-572)

---

[6] For example, (Hutton 2022): "The moral empiricist claims that there are cases in which agents form moral beliefs non-inferentially and *a posteriori*. 'Moral experience' refers to whatever mental state these non-inferential, *a posteriori* moral beliefs are based on." (2022: 571)

[7] We might want to distinguish between different senses of "judgment." In one sense, it is just forming a belief, based on evidence, whether that is perceptual experience or testimony, or something else. A different sense of "judgment" is something like arriving at a belief *for yourself*. Hume, in *the Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, holds that to make a moral judgment you must consider the facts from a certain point of view, when you are in a certain mood, and so on. On this thicker notion of judgment, you can only make a gustatory judgment by tasting something for yourself.

Hutton invites us to consider the following example (originally from Werner 1983). Fred is a utilitarian. He thinks that slavery could be justified in certain circumstances–in the circumstances in which it produces more happiness than the alternatives. He changes his mind when he watches *Roots*: "...something happens inside Fred which couldn't have happened without this vivid, concrete...encounter with the institution of slavery." (2022: 575) Another character, Barney, also watches *Roots*. He is an emotionally empathic dysfunctional individual who can't feel emotion. Barney does not change his mind.

Hutton argues that the best explanation of the difference between Fred and Barney is that Fred had an emotional experience, whereas Barney did not. The conclusion is that moral experiences are emotions.

Next Hutton invites us to consider a second example. Wilma is like Fred, but she reads the book *Roots,* feels emotion, and changes her mind. (2022: 578) Since Wilma didn't see a visual representation of slavery, it can't be that the basis of her new belief is a perceptual experience. The conclusion is moral experiences are not perceptual experiences.

To see what is wrong with these arguments, consider a modification of these examples: Alice forms the non-inferential belief that Hester is wearing a scarlet letter when she sees the movie, *The Scarlet Letter*. Betty forms the non-inferential belief that Hester is wearing a scarlet letter when she reads the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Betty formed a new color belief, but she didn't see a visual representation of the scarlet letter. So the basis of her new belief is not a perceptual experience. Therefore, color experiences are not perceptual experiences.

Obviously, this argument has gone wrong. Betty's belief about the color of the letter is not justified by a perceptual experience, but nothing follows from this about what color experiences are.

Once we appreciate this point, we can respond to Hutton's first argument—the argument *for* emotional intuitionism. We can grant the preliminary conclusion: that the best explanation for the difference between Barney and Fred is that Fred had an emotional experience, and Barney did not. But nothing follows from this about what moral experiences are.

More generally, since we can't infer what kind of experience did or did not justify a given individual's non-inferential *a posteriori* belief from what the belief is about, we should not take "moral experience" to be *whatever mental state justifies non-inferential moral judgment*.

VI. Moral Experience as a Privileged Mode of Access

Thus far I've examined two different ways of developing a theoretically useful understanding of what moral experience is supposed to be, and I have noted some of the challenges that arise for those approaches. I don't pretend to have made a conclusive case against the accounts that I've considered. Moreover, even if the considerations that I've rehearsed are persuasive, there are presumably other ways in which the accounts I have considered might be developed, ways that would need to be considered in any complete treatment of the topic.

One general theme of the objections that I have raised against the accounts of moral experience that I have discussed is that they fail to single out an interesting category of experience that deserves to be called "moral experience." A straightforward way to ensure that we succeed in singling out such a category would be to as whether there is a *privileged mode of experiential access* to moral reality, which is capable of directly justifying judgments with moral content. Rather than trying to explain what I mean by "privileged access" directly, I will illustrate by example. Properties like "being salty" and "being blue" are, in a certain sense, "made for" particular sensory modalities—gustatory and visual, respectively—and when those properties are experienced via their particular sensory modalities, they are in this sense experienced in a privileged way. Assuming that we do not have a dedicated moral sixth sense or moral sensory modality, is there nevertheless a way of experiencing moral properties that is privileged roughly in this sense?

One way to approach this question would be to ask whether there is a moral analog of Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment (Jackson 1982):

> Jackson's Black & White Mary: Mary is a color scientist who knows everything that there is to know about color that can be learned from books. But she is in a black-and-white room; she has never seen, among other things, a red tomato.

Mary lacks access to color via its privileged modality—visual perception. Now consider Kant's correspondent Maria von Herbert, who has studied Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* exhaustively, and so, let us stipulate, understands not only what morality requires, permits and forbids, but also, why it requires, permits and forbids what it does. Von Herbert writes to Kant that she does understand all these things, but continues, "I feel that a vast emptiness extends inside me...Nothing attracts me." (quoted in Langton 1992) Maria is a moral expert, but she does not experience anything as mattering.

It seems to me that, if there is a moral analogue to Jackson's Mary when she is in the black and white room, it is someone like Maria. Because she lacks affective responses to moral value, she seems to lack privileged access to it. In other words, if singular moral judgment has a privileged modality, that privileged modality plausibly involves something like the pull and repulsion of the things that matter morally.[8]

The Mary/Maria analogy is not perfect. One significant disanalogy is this. When Mary sees the red tomato, the redness of the tomato is part of the content of her visual experience. Mary's pre-tomato experiences clearly lack color content.[9] By contrast, it is far from obvious that what is missing from Maria's experiences is moral *content*. In fact, it is controversial whether anyone's experiences ever have moral content at all. But for my purposes this doesn't really matter; the important point is that someone who lacks affective engagement with morality seems to lack privileged access to it, in the sense explained.

To make it plausible that sensory experiences might be moral experiences even if sensory experiences do not have moral content, consider a paradigm example of forming a singular moral judgment in the presence of a particular event. Suppose you witness a frustrated parent strike a child in a parking lot. When you witness this event, you see it *as* an act of cruelty. You see it as cruel based on how it looks to you—it has the look of a cruel act.[10] But it doesn't follow that the property of being cruel is part of the content of your perceptual experience. It might be that the first place at which moral content appears is in the content of your moral judgment itself.

In the paradigmatic case of forming a singular moral judgment that we just considered, what triggers the moral judgment is a visual experience. One possibility is that, in the good case, affect assists sensory perception in its role of triggering singular moral judgment. There is empirical support for this suggestion: children as young as fifteen months old exhibit a very basic surprise reaction when they witness situations that are in some way normatively "off." (See, for example, Jin et al. 2024) The affective response that something is "off" directs the child to look longer at the locus of normative offense. So, one role that this

---

[8] Michael Stocker would call this "psychic feeling"—"the pull, attraction, inclination of desire—i.e. of full-blooded, feeling-laden desire." (Stocker 1983) Mark Johnston would call it evaluative experience, to which someone who is not affectively engaged could be "blind." (Johnston 2001)

[9] Of course, the point of Jackson's thought experiment is that, intuitively, Mary learns something new. Her visual system tells her something about the tomato that she didn't know before. According to (Byrne 2002), she learns something that is expressed in "visualese" that she couldn't learn by anybody telling her anything in English.

[10] When you make a moral judgment on the basis of your visual experience, this is not an inferential step, because the visual experience is not a belief: you are not reasoning from a belief to a judgment. Rather, the transition from the visual experience of an event to a judgment with moral content might be a subpersonal process. If the subpersonal process is reliable, then the process will count as knowledge. For further discussion, see (McGrath 2018).

normative "offness" reaction seems to play is that of focusing attention on features of the environment that prompt the reaction. A second role for affect to play is in the transition from what is given in visual perception to the formation of a moral judgment. Plausibly, the process of moral education is the process of training, expanding and developing the normative "offness" reaction so that normatively significant features of the environment draw the child's attention, and so that the child has negative affective responses to morally bad features and positive affective responses to morally good features. In the sensitive person, affective responses might enable the transition from a visual experience which represents the look of a cruel act to the judgment that the act was cruel.[11]

On a picture where affect is playing these two roles in facilitating moral judgment, we need not think of the *moral* element in moral experience as coming in at the level of the content of visual experience itself. Rather, the contents of visual perception can trigger or prompt the moral judgment, and affect can play a role in enabling the transition. So we might think of moral experience as a perceptual act which includes a moral judgment, where the moral judgment goes beyond what is given in sensory experience. The way that the scene visually appears—a child is being struck by a frustrated parent, which looks like an act of cruelty for a person who has had the right kind of moral education—can figure as the prompt for a sub-personal process arrives at the judgment, "that was cruel."[12]

This admittedly very rough sketch of moral experience grants something to both the perceptual intuitionist and the emotional intuitionist, since moral experience is the process in which sensory experience, assisted by affect, gives rise to moral judgment.[13] If something like this view is correct, Maria's "vast emptiness" is not just an affective deficit; it is also an epistemological deficit. The normatively significant features of her environment fail to engage her sensory attention, and affect fails to assist her in classifying those features in thought.

VII. New Replies to Two Standard Objections

The view on which moral experience is a privileged mode of access to moral content offers us a new way to answer two objections that have plagued the view that moral experiences are some kind of affective, emotion-like state, where this view is offered as satisfying the job descriptions considered in sections III and IV above. One objection is that it certainly *seems* as though it is possible to make a justified *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgment without feeling anything at all, or even while feeling an emotion that is valenced in a direction that is opposite to the relevant judgment. Theorists who pair the view that moral experiences are emotions with the job description on which moral experiences are whatever justifies *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgments (e.g. Hutton 2022) respond to the objection by saying apparent

[11] I am grateful to Mark Johnston for discussion of these points.

[12] How is this proposal related to the claim, defended in Siegel 2014, that "mandates" can be represented in the content of visual experience? According to Siegel, the visual experience of a piece of cake might include a mandate—imperatival content that says, roughly, "eat me!" Similarly, the visual experience of a crying child might include content that directs, roughly, "comfort me!" If Siegel is right that mandates are represented in the contents of visual experience, then there is still work for moral experience, as I am thinking of it, to do: namely, to be a privileged mode of access to moral content that stands as visual perception stands to color content. If Siegel is wrong about whether mandates are represented in the contents of visual experience, and her opponents are right that the contents of visual experience include only "thin" properties such as color and shape properties, this would be consistent with the possibility of moral experience, as I am thinking of it, because there is no commitment to the idea that moral properties, never mind mandates, can figure in the contents of visual perception.

[13] Recent work on valenced perception suggests additional roles for affect to play in moral perception. For development of the idea that sensory perception is intrinsically valenced see (Jacobson 2021) and (Jacobson forthcoming).

counterexamples are either (i) not really a justified *a posteriori* non-inferential moral judgments, or (ii) are cases in which you really *are* having some low-level, perhaps unnoticeable, moral emotion which does the justifying. But our revised job description enables us to dissolve the objection entirely: just as some, but not all, justified non-inferential *a posteriori* color judgments are justified by color experiences, so some, but not all, justified non-inferential *a posteriori* moral judgments are justified by moral experiences. On this view, affect assists perceptual moral judgment, but it is not essential to it.

The second standard objection to the view that moral experiences are some kind of affective state is that that affective states are not a sufficiently *reliable* guide to the moral landscape. But a central lesson from section II is that there are *two* ways that F-experience can make you better off with respect to F- judgment: by conferring expertise, or by directly justifying it. Impressions make us better off with respect to judgment by directly justifying it; not by conferring expertise. Just as color experience would *still be color experience* even if it systematically misled us with respect to how the world was colored, moral experience would still be moral experience even if it systematically misled us with respect to how the world was morally valenced. Moral impressions are *the kind of state* that can offer direct justification in auspicious epistemic circumstances; in unfortunate epistemic circumstances, they may fail to deliver.

VIII. Applications: What Can Moral Experience Do for You?

We have already seen, from the example of Maria von Herbert, that moral experience can explain what's missing from cases in which an agent has the intellectual grasp of the moral landscape before her, but fails to experience anything as mattering, and so lacks the motivation to do what morality beckons her to do. It is also a good basis for the performance of actions with "moral worth." It might even play this role in a way that is ecumenical between competing theories. On some views about moral worth, an action has moral worth *because it is performed on the basis of emotional states that are tracking the moral facts in the proper way*. On other views about moral worth, an action has moral worth *because it is done out of respect for the moral law*.[14] Moral experience, on the view developed here, has content that is both representational and affective: it would represent that something is one's duty, say, via an affective response. If this is correct, then the fact that one is acting on the basis of emotional states that are tracking the moral facts does not preclude that one is acting out of recognition of one's duty. Relatedly, there is a debate within the moral worth literature about whether morally worthy action is ever motivated by the thought that *this is the right thing to do*, or whether it is always motivated by thought about right-makers, such as *this is my friend, and he needs my help*. Moral experience has ameliorative potential here, since it is (i) an emotional reaction to (say) the fact that a friend needs help, which (ii) presents the content that the action is right. The truth in the idea that the good person is not motivated by the instantiation of rightness alone would be that the motivational component of the recognition of rightness involves moral experience in response to the underlying right-makers. The experience has the content that the action is right, but what makes it *moral* experience is its emotional affective component, which supplies the motivational force.[15]

In addition, moral experience has the potential to explain why there initially appears to be a "moral acquaintance principle" analogous to aesthetic acquaintance principles.[16] We are at least initially surprised when we discover that someone who judges, "Julian is a fantastic guitar player," has never heard him play; we are at least initially surprised when we discover that someone who judges, "Julian is a fantastic person" has never met him. The similarity between the two cases is that we expect passionate judgments such as

[14] Kant himself seems to allow for some kind of experiential access to the moral law: "Respect for the [moral] law, which in its subjective aspect is called moral feeling, is identical with consciousness of one's duty." (Kant 1797/1996: 210)

[15] Thus, it can be what (King 2018) wants it to be, because it is a state of mind that has the content that the act is right. But it can also be what Arpaly (2004) wants it to be, because what supplies the motivation is the person's motivational dispositions toward the right-makers, rather than the rightness.

[16] For discussion see (Robson and Wallbank 2024).

these ones to have been prompted by the kind of experience that offers a privileged mode of access to the relevant content, rather than by testimony.

Finally, reflection on the fact that moral experience might be unreliable suggests an explanation for the fact that moral disagreement can tend to be intractable. The idea that some people are in "the bad case" with respect to their moral experiences might help us shed light on certain aspects of moral disagreement, such as its notable intractability.

VII. Conclusion

An interesting and theoretically useful thing for moral experience to be is something like an affectively assisted perceptual experience that enables moral judgment. This makes moral experience recognizable as a type of experience that is distinctively moral. It can make us better off with respect to moral judgment in the direct-justifier/impression way. And it is theoretically useful, in that it has the potential shed light on some aspects of our moral life, such as depression, morally worthy action, the initial plausibility of moral acquaintance principles, and the intractability of moral disagreement.

REFERENCES

Arpaly, Nomy. 2004. *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry Into Moral Agency*. 1st edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Basanta, Sara Fernández, Iria Bouzas-González, Carmen Coronado, and María-Jesús Movilla-Fernández. 2022. "Moral Experiences in Caring for Voluntary Pregnancy Losses: A Meta-Ethnography." *Nursing Ethics* 29 (5): 1134–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/09697330221085769.

Byrne, Alex. 2002. "Something About Mary." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 63 (1): 27–52. https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-90000760.

Elmore, James, David Kenneth Wright, and Maude Paradis. 2018. "Nurses' Moral Experiences of Assisted Death: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Research." *Nursing Ethics* 25 (8): 955–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733016679468.

Hinton, J. M. 1973. *Experiences: An Inquiry into Some Ambiguities*. Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Hunt, M. R., and F. A. Carnevale. 2011. "Moral Experience: A Framework for Bioethics Research." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 37 (11): 658–62. https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.2010.039008.

Hutton, James. 2022. "Moral Experience: Perception or Emotion?" *Ethics* 132 (3): 570–97. https://doi.org/10.1086/718079.

Jackson, Frank. 1982. "Epiphenomenal Qualia." *The Philosophical Quarterly (1950-)* 32 (127): 127–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/2960077.

Jacobson, Hilla. 2021. "The Role of Valence in Perception: An Artistic Treatment." *Philosophical Review* 130 (4): 481–531. https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-9263939.

———. forthcoming. "On the Very Idea of Valenced Perception." *Journal of Philosophy*.

Jin, Kyong-sun, Fransisca Ting, Zijing He, and Renée Baillargeon. 2024. "Infants Expect Some Degree of Positive and Negative Reciprocity between Strangers." *Nature Communications* 15 (1): 7742. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-51982-7.

Johnston, Mark. 2001. "The Authority of Affect." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1): 181–214. https://doi.org/10.2307/3071094.

Kagan, Shelly. 2001. "Thinking About Cases." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2): 44. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265052500002892.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press.

King, Zoe Johnson. 2018. "Accidentally Doing the Right Thing." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 100 (1): 186–206. https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12535.

Langton, Rae. 1992. "Duty and Desolation." *Philosophy* 67 (262): 481–505.

McGrath, Sarah. 2004. "Moral Knowledge by Perception." *Philosophical Perspectives* 18:209–28.

———. 2018. "Moral Perception and Its Rivals." In *Evaluative Perception*, edited by Anna Bergqvist and Robert Cowan, 0. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198786054.003.0009.

———. 2020. *Moral Knowledge*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Robson, Jon, and Rebecca Wallbank. 2024. "Aesthetic Testimony." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Spring 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/aesthetic-testimony/.

Stocker, Michael. 1983. "Psychic Feelings: Their Importance and Irreducibility." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1): 5–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048408312349841.

Wiland, Eric. 2021. *Guided by Voices: Moral Testimony, Advice, and Forging a "We."* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, Timothy. 2025. "Moral Anti-Exceptionalism." In *Good as Usual: Anti-Exceptionalist Essays on Values, Norms, and Action*, edited by Timothy Williamson, 0. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191982439.003.0001.