The Phenomenology of Moral Intuition

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Abstract

Moral judgment commonly depends on intuition. It is also true, though less widely agreed, that ethical theory depends on it. The nature and epistemic status of intuition have long been concerns of philosophy, and, with the increasing importance of ethical intuitionism as a major position in ethics, they are receiving much philosophical attention. There is growing agreement that intuition conceived as a kind of seeming is essential for both the justification of moral judgment and the confirmation of ethical theories. This paper describes several importantly different kinds of intuition, particularly the episodic kinds often called *seemings*. This is done partly by sketching numerous examples of intuition. Intuitive seemings and moral judgments based on them differ in content, basis, epistemic authority, and phenomenology. The paper explores these four dimensions of intuition and, in doing so, compares moral intuition with moral perception. The overall aim is to clarify moral phenomenology both descriptively and epistemologically and to support the view that intuitions are often discriminative responses to experience and have justificatory power analogous to the power of sense-perceptions.

Keywords Emotion · Moral experience · Moral judgment · Perception · Phenomenal episode · Recognition · Seeming

1 The Phenomenology of Moral Intuition

Phenomenology as conceived here is the critical study of experience. There are myriad questions about the character of experience, both “inner” and “outer.” Perception represents both: it entails a connection to the external world, but it also embodies a kind of sensory experience that is internal to our consciousness. Thought, including intuitive reflection, is also a focus of phenomenological inquiry: there is, for instance, something it is like to reflect, to imagine, to anticipate, to recall, and to have an intuition. A great deal has been

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written on intuition, as on phenomenology. Far less has been written on the phenomenology of moral intuition, still less on its relation to moral perception and moral experience in general.¹ This paper will attempt to advance moral phenomenology in ways that do justice to both its distinctive character and its epistemological role. Sections I and II clarify the nature of intuition and its relation to moral perception. Sections III–IV describe its connections with moral experience and moral emotions, showing how these may be effects as well as causes of moral intuition. The remaining sections concern the evidential value of moral intuition and illustrate this with examples concerning veracity, fidelity, justice, and beneficence as central domains of normative ethics.

2 Some Varieties of Intuition

Through almost the entire 20th century and in some cases more recently, intuitions have been widely considered beliefs.² When doxastic intuitions manifest themselves in consciousness, say as an aspect of having the thought that *p*, they have a phenomenal character. In the literature of epistemology, the kind that are present in consciousness, are widely considered the basic kind and *not* to entail belief. Rather, they are (when their objects are propositional) a comprehending relation to the proposition in question (*p*) with a sense of its being true—or at least credible—in *its own right*. This sense of truth, typically accompanied by an inclination to believe *p*, is non-inferential: not based on a premise or a sense of support by one or more other propositions. One may believe that *p* is supportable by other propositions, but an intuition that *p* is a cognitively positive response that is not *based on* any such belief (or other truth-valued cognition).

Consider the proposition that my accepting a gift from a visiting student might legitimate an expectation of more discussion than I can manage. The proposition is before my mind and seems true in its own right: I have an episodic intuition that it is true. I need no premises for it and feel inclined to affirm it. My sense of its truth is enhanced by my imagining the difficulty of declining requests to read drafts, but it seems true to me independently of this thought or of a premise, e.g. that accepting gifts produces a duty of gratitude. Imagining this task may be accompanied by a mental picture of reading drafts. But this is not necessary. People differ in the phenomenology of their intuitions—whether ratiocinative, pictorial, or emotional. Phenomenological differences also occur when the objects of intuition are general or highly abstract. The intuition that square pegs will not smoothly fit in round holes may well (when occurrent) be accompanied by an image of a peg and a hole; but having the intuition does not require illustrative images.

Given that phenomenology concerns the character of consciousness, it is natural to think of the phenomenology of intuition as concerned with the episodic cases. In any event, we can unify phenomenological reflection on intuition by conceiving the overall notion as having episodic intuitions as its core. First, then, we might take *doxastic intuitions* (a) to embody a disposition to *have* episodic intuitions with the same content and (b) to be normally based on

¹ For a wide-ranging discussion of phenomenology that reflects a concern with the moral elements, see Drummond and Timmons ([forthcoming](#)).

² This is documented in Audi (2015), which I follow in indicating differences in conceptions of intuition in ethics traditionally and in epistemology in recent decades. The most important point of similarity is that on either doxastic or seemings accounts, intuitions can provide “immediate justification.”

them, e.g. on earlier reflections in which they produced an intuitive seeming that p .³ These intuitions are not equivalent to beliefs of intuitive propositions—which are often themselves called intuitions—but belief states whose appearance (“occurring”) in consciousness is constituted by *both* the dispositions appropriate to believing p and, in some cases, phenomenal elements of the kind that go with finding p true in its own right. Doxastic intuitions are compatible with certainty that p but do not entail it. Second, *intuitiveness* in a proposition is a truth-appearance of the kind manifested in an episodic intuition with the same propositional content: broadly, evoking a sense of non-inferential credibility, not credibility through support by some premise(s). Third, we must accommodate what might be called *objectual intuition*, the analogue of perceiving an object. This, when occurrent, as where one focuses on an entailment relation, is an apprehensional consciousness of the concept, property, or other object in question with a focus that makes possible episodic intuitions about one or more aspects of it. Fourth, one might speak of *judgmental intuition*, which occurs when one makes a judgment one finds intuitive—something common in spontaneous moral avowals. This may be conceived as an assenting cognitive response to an episodic intuition. Fifth, the ‘*faculty*’ of intuition may be viewed, analogously to that of sense-perception, as the non-inferential rational capacity whose central exercise is in our forming episodic intuitions and retaining an appropriate range of dispositional cognitions.

Given this partial account, we can see why self-ascription of intuitions very often indicates belief: we *tend* to believe what is intuitive for us, and self-ascription of a proposition puts it before the mind. The account also partly explains the point, implicit in the concept of a doxastic intuition, that if one *considers* its propositional object (p), one tends to find p intuitive. Suppose, as is arguable, the basis of doxastic intuition *is* episodic intuition. Then it is expectable that, upon comprehendingly considering p —unless under defeating conditions that eliminate its appearance of truth—one will have an episodic intuition that p .

Intuitive justificatory grounds do not indefeasibly support belief, but beliefs deriving from them receive *prima facie* justification.⁴ If it intuitively seems to me that accepting a gift might evoke legitimate expectations, I thereby have some justification for believing this. Doxastic intuitions, moreover, as non-inferential cognitions, may rest directly on such grounds. This basis does not guarantee truth, but it does eliminate defeat by inferential dependence on a false premise or on invalid reasoning. In most of what follows, intuition will be considered episodic and non-doxastic, but we need not rule out the possibility of doxastic intuitions as one kind.

To be sure, ‘episodic’ can mislead. As someone gives a paper, I may have intuitions that p , q , and r , each of which I find plausible, and intuitions that not- s and not- t . I need have no experience naturally called an episode, but there is intuitional experience nonetheless, and the experience may have more unity than is captured say ‘sequence’. By contrast, a passing flash of insight might suffice for an episode. There may also be, as the paper unfolds, an umbrella intuition of *plausibility*—a objectual intuition that is holistic rather than focal. It may tend to put in a positive light individual propositions I remember as parts of the whole

³ For a recent defense of this view, see Brown (2013), and for doubts about it, together with a review of the case for the justificatory power of intellectual seemings, see Huemer (2013). The basis need not be the origin; one could believe p on testimony and only later find it intuitive.

⁴ This (I think plausible) view is defended in detail by proponents of “phenomenal conservatism,” the view that if it seems to one that p , one has some degree of justification for believing p . For extensive discussion see Tucker (2013).

but consider only later. It is a kind of innocence by association or, sometimes, of support by fitting a coherent pattern. Similarly, if those propositions, individually, are plausible to me, they may combine to give intuitive plausibility to the paper as a whole.

3 Moral Intuition and Moral Perception

Perception is structurally similar to intuition. Take seeing and intuiting: both can be, e.g., *that p*, *of x* (some object), and *of x as F*. We speak of intuitively “seeing” truths. Moreover, as different as sensory experiences are from intuitive seemings, both are cognitive in a sense implying receiving information (in the generic sense allowing for falsehood) and thereby having a disposition to form beliefs that reflect it. Perception, however, need not yield intuitions. In the most familiar case, seeing objects around one, a perceptual mode that commonly yields intuitions—it does not. For one kind of confirmation, consider what is now visible to you. This may yield various visual beliefs. Now consider a moral case. Seeing and hearing one person speak to another might elicit an intuition that the speaker is (reprehensibly) intimidating the hearer. This does not entail seeing that this is so (nor need that be true). Most kinds of intuition, to be sure, do not have objects that are even possible objects of perception taken in the usual physical sense. Propositions, relations of validity, deviations from good linguistic usage, wrongness in hypothetical actions, and many other objects of intuition are not physically perceptible.

This contrast between what visually appears true and what intuitively seems so may appear to prevent some propositions from being simultaneously intuitive for a person and seen to be true. But the contrast here is between *kinds* of occurrent cognitions; it does not entail that a proposition—say that Baron is intimidating Tiny Tim—cannot be intuitive for a person who happens to see (perceptually) that it is true. Here the belief is based on a visual experience of the fact, but the intuitiveness of the proposition expressing that fact is based on something like the proposition’s fitting a pattern of domination. A single experience, then, can combine seeing someone *being* intimidated with an intuition *that* the person is being intimidated. But seeing the event of intimidation, qua visual experience, does not entail either seeing or intuiting *that* the person is intimidated. If, however—as might be natural—one perceptually believes this and thereby sees *that* the person is intimidated, this would imply perceptually knowing it. What we know can certainly be intuitive, but the point here is that visual knowledge itself is not an intuition, though it may be a *basis* of some intuition.⁵

Perception embodies sensory phenomenology; perceptual belief is responsive to that, but the two differ in phenomenology. Seeing that someone is intimidated is a case of belief-formation based on responding to the perceptible pattern and is roughly *recognitional*. Where such perceptions yield intuition, the proposition is plausible given the pattern, but the content of the pattern plays a different role: the mind is drawn to the proposition more as interpretation than as a plain fact. The distinction is not sharp, and we need not deny that an intuition that someone is intimidated may lead, say by intensifying or directing attention,

⁵ Since (perceptually) seeing that *p* entails ‘*p*’, it is natural to take intellectually seeing that *p* as also factive. If such seemings can be intuitions, then (assuming ‘seeing that’ is belief-entailing) some intuitions are doxastic. Unlike some, I allow for doxastic intuition, but (partly for phenomenological reasons) do not take intellectually seeing that *p* to entail it.

to seeing that this is so. Seeing that it is so, however, may be displaced by doubts which leave the sensory experience in tact but eliminate the belief initially formed. Here the visual perception may still leave a residue of the kind of intuition with which a more cautious observer, wary of believing there is intimidation, might have remained in the first place.

Intuitive belief may also have abstract objects. Here, too, it differs from perceptual belief. It is intuitive that for any persons, *x*, *y*, and *z*, if *x* is married to *y* and *z* is the sister of *y*, then *x* has a sister-in-law. Must concrete propositions differ from such abstract ones in the ways they may be intuitive? Take the intuition that *X* is lying. Surely this proposition can be intuitive, as where I see an appearance of deceptiveness in what *A* says. There are at least two cases. If the belief is appropriate but not confident, it might have an intuitive phenomenology. Where, however, it is obvious that *A* is lying, the belief may arise in an almost automatic way in which the relevant facts are unhesitatingly read. This may be a kind of seeing which is recognitional without any intuitive phenomenology.

Philosophical examples of intuition typically concern cases in which *p* is entertained. These are *focal*: *p* is before the mind. One might, however, have an intuition as an impression of truth with no such focus. Imagine a first-time purchaser of a patio umbrella. Before opening it, one might have the impression that this requires turning the crank clockwise, as in starting certain motors. But it might seem to someone else that opening requires counter-clockwise turning. In neither case need the proposition come before the mind, though there might be a standing cognition. One person might have a crank-up “picture,” the other an unscrewing “picture” that goes with the idea that the folded umbrella is closed. To be sure, there is no sharp distinction between a case in which one simply acts on a standing belief (or a habit) that does not surface in consciousness and, by contrast, an intuitive seeming that forms partly by analogy (though non-inferentially). Moral cases can apparently be similar. Experience, especially of previous behavior or of role modeling by others, can make such gestures as tapping a shoulder seem called for and others, such as back-slapping, seem intrusive. Intuition may emerge as a non-inferential precipitate of experience or an accompaniment of habitual responses.

We have seen both similarities and differences between the phenomenology of perception and that of intuition. The former is sensory, the latter intellectual. But both intuition and perception may have propositional as well as non-propositional objects. One major difference, however, is that whereas propositional perception depends on non-propositional (usually physical) perception, propositional intuition need not rest on objectual intuition—the object may be a hypothetical narrative. Seeing that *p* is factive and requires seeing something; intuition that *p*—say that Baron is intimidating Tim—is not factive and may arise from either ordinary perception of a conversation—a perceived object, if you like—but also from a hypothetical remembered episode with the same content. This disanalogy in object-dependence does not prevent intuition from being either true or non-inferential. It shares with perception the ability to respond to evidence without intervening premises.

4 Moral Experience as a Basis of Moral Intuition

If perceptions are experiences, a moral perception is a kind of moral experience. But it may be phenomenally “thin.” Suppose it is momentary—say where one witnesses a manipulative lie and, confident that the hearer will not fall for it, leaves the scene. Here, speaking

of a moral experience seems to exaggerate the significance of what occurs in the perceiver. Imagine, however, witnessing a manipulative lie in the assuring words of a child molester telling a six-year-old of candy just inside the car. There might be moral outrage. Even if police quickly intervene, the outrage may linger. It might also pass into an anxious moral disquietude—one wonders how this can happen on an ordinary shopping street.

In the attempted molestation case, intuition need not come in. But if we simply imagine hearing a man who apparently does not know a child and is offering candy, in a situation with no parent or guardian present, intuition may enter the picture only gradually, perhaps as a sense that the child is being lured. One might be in a kind of distress, a sort of moral anxiety. This experience is a moral emotion, and it may give rise to an intuition that the man is luring the child. The intuition, however, could come first, for instance where, initially, there is trust toward the man and, later, discernment of darker purpose gradually yields an intuitive sense of deceit and then moral anxiety. The relation between emotion and intuition is not a one-way street. In either case, a person of normal moral sensibility has some desire to protect the child. That desire will have a motivational phenomenology, yielding a felt inclination to act.⁶

With indignation, moral experience and emotion may come together. Imagine seeing someone you know to have been stopped for reckless driving hand money to a police officer and depart. This is more than occurrent disapproval; you see the bribe and its acceptance as outrageous. No less emotional and potentially more lasting is the kind of moral anguish one might feel at a mistake of one's own. If, after supporting a verdict of guilty, I saw a prosecution witness receiving cash from the prosecutor, the horrifying realization of imprisoning an innocent person would be a sinking feeling of having done terrible harm.

It has seemed to some philosophers that occurrent moral intuitions—a kind of intellectual moral experience—depend on emotion. “Broad and Ewing sometimes suggested that intuition has emotional preconditions: only if you feel certain emotions, which for Broad, were ones of moral approval and disapproval, can you recognize acts as right or wrong” (Hurka 2014: 111). To be sure, approbation and disapprobation have non-emotional forms, but even apart from that, the narrow precondition view in question would not account for judgments that an act is neither obligatory nor impermissible but merely discretionary.

Moral experience also need not arise from perception of something morally significant or even from learning (e.g. by testimony) of its occurrence. Simply considering future options can evoke moral experience. Here intuition may play a causative role in future conduct or be itself produced by the experience, or both. Consider being offered a large bonus to market a drug at prices that, though legal, exploit the poor. One might feel moral revulsion at the thought of facilitating such inflated profits. But suppose the inflation is not great and that the company will do research toward a treatment of a scourge like covid-19. This complex prospect may yield moral intuitions—that the work is wrongful complicity, that, on the other hand, it is morally proper as supporting good research, that accepting the offer is owed to one's children as having urgent unmet needs. It may be only when an intuition of *overall* wrongdoing emerges that the disquieting revulsion arises. In some, this would lead

⁶ This point is highly consonant with the motivational element Horgan and Timmons stress in (2018). They note motivational elements in moral judgment, whereas my point concerns moral intuition, which is less strongly connected with motivation. Also clarifying on the phenomenology of moral cognitions in general and with emphasis on motivational “pro attitudes” is Coetsee (2020). For a detailed appraisal of motivational internalism see Audi (1993).

to declining the job; in others, it might yield rationalizations that facilitate accepting it. In neither case, however, need the intuition be “emotionally valenced intuition.”⁷ The intuition may be simply an intellectual response to different ways of imagining the prospect.

Intuitions, then, like emotions, can be mixed. Moral intuitions and moral emotions are no exception. The last example, concerning pharmaceutical sales, illustrates both. It also illustrates that moral experiences can be positive—something easily underappreciated given the greater prominence of the negative in so much of ethics. In considering what I owe my students, I may have the moral experience of feeling drawn to doing more for them. Empathy may cooperate (I know the difficulty of philosophy); but what I experience is a sense of obligation. My intuitions might point to the desirability of certain deeds, such as rereading a paper, and some of these might seem obligatory and evoking an associated felt need to act. There might not be emotion; the case could be combined with a cool intellectual intuition of moral obligation. But it need not yield that and would be no less moral if it coexisted with a conflicting intuition of the parentalism that easily accompanies being over-directive.

People differ greatly in their threshold for emotion and indeed in the range of emotions they experience. To be sure, moral experience is not necessarily emotional, but it is rarely without some positive or negative element. Consider a sense of being treated unfairly in a competition. One might experience a sense of disapprobation. But there could be too little affect to make the experience one of moral emotion, as opposed to non-emotional disapprobation or dislike. One need not, for instance, experience an aroused sense of injustice. One might coolly think that the injustice was not malicious and that anyway one would not have placed differently. One might be annoyed; but even though annoyance can qualify as emotion, mild annoyance is more like the irritation of a slight itch than like a backache.⁸

Moral experience is commonly attended by or even responsive to moral emotion, but it does not have to be, as where we intuitively respond to a hypothetical scenario that simply presents an intellectual problem. Intuition may, however, both evoke emotion and arise in response to it. The association is so close, both in fact and in philosophical discussion, that we do well to consider cases in which moral intuition occurs without emotion.

5 Moral Intuition Without Emotion

The examples of moral experiences given so far might create the mistaken impression that moral experiences are either emotional or in some way negative, but they need not be either. An executor might experience moral satisfaction at the thought of having justly settled an estate. This thought may be realized in an (episodic) intuition of just distribution; it might lead to that intuition's rising to belief. There is also moral satisfaction of a purely cognitive kind, e.g. a kind centered simply on holding the judgment that one has done justice. Here it is natural to speak of satisfaction *that*, as distinct from satisfaction *in*, *at*, or *over*. But there is also a kind of positive attitude which, integrated with a feeling of having resolved such a

⁷ The phrase ‘emotionally valenced intuition’ is from Haidt’s much discussed (2001). For a sympathetic explication, in which Haidt’s intuitions are “just what I call emotion or feelings or sentiments” see Gibbard (2006), which provides an expressivist picture (e.g. 208–11) of intuitions that contrasts with my more cognitivist picture.

⁸ Cf. Tolhurst (1990), which construes all moral experience as emotion (p. 67). For a critique of this paper see Sinnott-Armstrong (1990), 89–96.

problem, constitutes a moral experience, roughly a felt sense of just achievement. It is perhaps a kind of equilibrium, as distinct from a judgment that equilibrium has been achieved.⁹

If there is moral satisfaction in the thought of having done justice in the past, there are surely moral experiences that center on presently doing justice. If, in distributing funds to the beneficiaries, one feels that one is being just, and one also has a sense of the moral appropriateness of the distribution, we might have a case of an experience of doing justice. This sense may derive from an intuition; but it is also possible that the moral experience of doing the distribution evokes the intuition. Moral experience may yield moral intuition as a response, but intuition focused on one's doing the distribution may also elicit moral experience, say experience in which making the distribution is suffused with an occurrent attitude of moral approval: the act "feels right."

If, moreover, we think of Kant's emphasis on acting from duty, we can identify a different kind of moral experience, or at least a further element in some such experiences: something we might call the *sense of moral self-determination*.¹⁰ This experience may be effortful—one may even be consciously struggling against selfish inclinations. But the case could be one of sensing the power of one's commitment to a moral standard, as where one unhesitatingly refuses a bribe. Here one might have an intuition of moral necessity—of a strong overall obligation to refuse despite the benefits of using the tainted money wisely. This has been called moral compulsion. The phrase is misleading, however: even if where there is no question of doing otherwise, such cases may be accompanied by a feeling of freedom. This sense of free agency is a good that seems quite distinctive and not reducible to pleasure.

One might think that Kant takes both moral judgment and intuition—when intuition figures as a cognitive element either in judgment or independently of it—as kinds of emotion. This is not clear. But Kantian respect shares with emotion both motivational power and a kind of feeling. "The feeling, under the name of moral feeling is ... produced solely by reason" (1785/1991; 5: 76). If moral emotion *is* invariably an element in moral cognitions as Kant saw them, we might at least take them to have a phenomenology that reflects their rational origin as fully as do the related motivational elements determined by reason. His view apparently allows for some intuitions to take the form of moral judgments with motivational power sufficient to overcome even strong contrary inclinations.¹¹

Moral self-determination, for Kant as for many others, is an important element in moral autonomy; and the experience of that self-determination, for instance in one's doing justice to a student surprised by a low grade, may be accompanied by a sense of being moved by some moral consideration understood as such.¹² To be sure, one could have this sense when

⁹ One might stretch the idea of moral satisfaction in a way that yields a description of emotion. This is in line with the "social intuitionism" of Haidt (2001), considered in the light of empirical evidence by Sinnott-Armstrong (2006). For my purposes, even ignoring the case for intuition as a cause of emotion rather than vice-versa, the essential point for moral epistemology is that both may reflect the same evidence for the normative proposition that the moral intuition expresses.

¹⁰ At one point Kant says, "The moral disposition is necessarily connected with a consciousness of the determination of the will directly by ... a pure law of reason ..." See (1788/1956; 5:116–17).

¹¹ An informative and highly comprehensive treatment of Kantian respect (situated broadly) is Kriegel and Timmons (2021).

¹² A related phenomenon, which also seems a case of moral experience, is what Maurice Mandelbaum called a *demand*. He meant a sense of what one (morally) must do, say upon realizing one has promised to A. "It is in a passage that recalls both Kantian motivational internalism and Broad's account of fittingness (1930) he says that "[T]he basis of the reflexive demand which an agent feels when he is confronted by what appears to him to be a moral situation is his apprehension of a fittingness between a specific envisioned action and

one is not in fact so moved. Here one might or might not be deceived about one's motivation. But surely we are not always deceived in having this sense. As Kant saw, particularly when duty prevails over conflicting inclination, we can be aware of the determinative force of the winning elements within us. That experience can be broadly moral. When it is moral, it can yield moral satisfaction, cognitive or experiential.¹³ In some cases of moral satisfaction there is a mix of the morally positive with the personally negative. Acknowledging a mistake that one could have concealed may yield a satisfaction in veracity simultaneously with a sense of guilt regarding the acknowledged mistake.

Moral experience need not be emotional and so is not reducible, as the early emotivists may have thought, to negative emotions like indignation or positive ones like zeal. Consider moral satisfaction. Its core is a sense of moral fittingness, or at least adequacy, regarding some judgment or conduct; and intuition may be an element in it or a factor in evoking it. Granted, if there is no emotion, the experience may seem thin. But there is no need for proponents of the importance of moral experience to posit a dominating coloration of one's whole consciousness. It is enough that there is something distinctively moral in consciousness at the time and that it be appropriately experienced. There may or may not be an assenting entertainment of an appropriate moral proposition, but in any case the experience goes beyond this kind of intellectual consciousness. This condition seems to be met by all the representative examples I have offered: in each, there is a distinctively moral integration of cognitive and experiential elements.

It may seem that some of our examples involve no more than a keen awareness of an intuited moral proposition, say that someone is cheating a friend. Such an awareness *can* serve as the central cognitive element in a moral experience. But a keen awareness of an intuited proposition may be purely cognitive. Awareness of an intuited proposition *p* may be retrospective and, in any case, does not entail having a simultaneous intuition that *p*. To be sure, if the awareness is combined with felt conviction that *p*, this may give it an affective element. But even if, say, the felt certainty of a moral proposition is a kind of affirmational experience, it is not the sort of experience that chiefly concerns me. This is because the moral element in the experience derives at least largely from considering the content of the relevant belief, and because the experiential element in question—felt conviction—can accompany any belief, regardless of subject matter.¹⁴ Moreover, far from reducing to a keen awareness of intuited propositions, moral experience may be a ground of such intuitions in the first place. We may intuitively judge that a deed is wrong because our experience of it is one of moral revulsion; the intuition may be a product, not a cause, of the revulsion.

the situation in which he finds himself... The relation of being fitting or unfitting is ... indefinable, but I have attempted to indicate its meaning ostensibly..." (1955), 69.

¹³. It is an interesting question whether a sufficiently empathic person can have moral experiences by virtue of a far-reaching awareness of others' experiences. Such *second-hand moral experiences* are apparently possible.

¹⁴. A further point is that by itself a feeling of certainty has no evidential value; one can rely on such certainty as an indication of justification or truth only if one is certain on good grounds or has independent grounds to trust one's certainty. By contrast, moral experiences may in themselves have significant evidential and even moral value.

6 The Evidential Role of Moral Intuition

If intuitions of any kind are experiences, then as such they do not admit of justification. This does not imply normative insignificance. Far from it: they can still be normative—in *upshot*. This occurs where experiences self-evidently entail *prima facie* reasons, as in the case of promising. Moreover, like sensory experiences that have representational content, they are eligible to justify beliefs. It is arguable, indeed, that intuitions with such abstract objects as entailment relations are intellectual “perceptions.” May the same be said of intuitions with empirical objects, e.g. that A is wronging B? I accept a strong analogy, but it seems more plausible to conceive empirical intuitions as akin to perceptual propositional beliefs, such as seeing someone denigrate another, which can be intuited, as well as sometimes simply seen.

Episodic intuitions, then, as experiences, do not stand in need of justification but may confer it. This is particularly so when an intuition arises from an emotion that is itself moral evidence, as illustrated by our intimidation case. A moral emotion, however, need not be cognitively represented, as it is by an intuition that one person is wronging another. Here intuition may be guided by emotion or, more directly, by the pattern that evokes emotion. In either case such intuitions may share with emotions both evidential value and phenomenological elements.¹⁵ Like sense-experiences, they can mislead, but they share with such experiences, if to a lesser degree, evidential force. The propositional object of an intuition may be false; its object may be non-existent, as where a plausible but invalid argument evokes an intuition of validity; and some property an intuition ascribes may be absent. These cases are surely not the norm. Consider an ascriptive intuition of someone’s behavior *as* denigrating another person in a meeting, where the impression is grounded in a way that renders it justificatory. Moreover, giving that impression is counted a standard criticism in the professional context of critical discourse. Intuition is a discriminative capacity that tends to be responsive to grounds—moral, epistemic, aesthetic, and of other kinds. In this, it is like perception as a sensory discriminative capacity. Both can mislead, but both reveal much that is true.

Given that moral intuition is my central concern, it is appropriate to illustrate it with respect to the kind of common-sense moral standards that are discernible in philosophers as different as Aristotle, Kant, and Ross. Keeping these standards and some observations about their phenomenology in mind, we can see some broad points of moral epistemology. The standards I include are those concerning veracity and fidelity, justice and non-injury, beneficence and self-improvement, reparation, and gratitude, and liberty and respectfulness.¹⁶ Space permits considering only some representative cases. In any of these, intuition may figure in our experience regarding past events, contemporaneous matters—where perception can be a factor—future possibilities, as in deliberating about options, or hypothetical cases.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Tappolet’s discussion (2015: 80–85) of the “perceptual theory of emotions” for further discussion of the kind of evidential pattern that is, on my view, often accessible directly through intuition by way of the agent’s sensitivity to emotional responses to moral patterns.

¹⁶ These ten cases of *prima facie* obligation are discussed at length in Audi (2004), esp. ch 5.

¹⁷ It is not self-evident that no descriptively specifiable obligation is overriding, but this is shown to be plausible in my (2006).

7 Veracity and Promissory Fidelity

Suppose I am my mother's executor and, on her deathbed, she asks me to distribute the cash in her safe deposit box to her three grandchildren in equal shares of (say) \$3,500 as soon as possible after the funeral. I know that one of them will squander the money on alcohol, but this is not a time to argue or even discuss the matter, and the thought merely crosses my mind, which is mainly occupied with giving comfort. I agree, knowing that her expectation is that I will deliver the cash promptly. But my intention is to try to persuade the alcoholic to get treatment and, if that fails, to provide the funds in several small installments. I've never lied to her and begin to wonder if I now have. It seems to me that I have not, and this is perhaps an intuition regarding the conversation in context; but I also have the intuition that I owe it to the alcoholic nephew to try to help, and that this counterbalances my ill-ease about an apparent deception. For all that, I *feel* uncomfortable—not quite guilty, but regretful. Shortly after the time for distribution, the nephew unfortunately discovers that the other grandchildren have received the full amount at once and complains. I now have a sense of guilt and say that I'm in the middle of something and will call back soon as I can. This seems a "white lie"—I was not doing anything uninterruptable. I feel a tinge of embarrassment and anxiety. I immediately begin to reflect. Finally, I arrive at an intuitive sense that I should be unqualifiedly honest and find an unhurtful solution. I acknowledge the commitment to distribute the funds but also ask for a promise to seek help before I release the remaining funds. As these reflections proceed, the phenomenology of my moral intuitions may be accompanied by a sense of motivation to act. In normal persons, moral intuition seems tinged by motivation to act; and, as Kant surely saw, when self-addressed moral judgments arise from it, the motivation may yield intention.¹⁸

Assume my plan succeeds and the nephew at least makes an appointment that may lead to his getting help. I cannot avoid looking back on the distribution decision. It now intuitively seems to me that although I did literal justice and thereby kept my word to my mother, I overlooked an option: I could have escrowed the entire amount, told each that their shares would come in installments with some interest, and then, with the first installment, urged the alcoholic nephew to seek help. I am almost ashamed of myself for not thinking of this sooner, but console myself that as a first-time executor I must not be alone in overlooking such options for distribution.

The executorial example illustrates how moral obligation can yield action, emotion, reflection, intuition, motivation, and more. It makes clear, too, how fulfilling an obligation can lead to further action and to retrospective thought, feeling, intuition, and motivation. We can see more by varying the case. This time, I am asked to promise to carry out the will, which contains the same provision. I know the will and that I can execute it. I readily promise. In doing so, I do not recall that the alcoholic nephew owes me more than the bequeathed \$3,500. When the time for distribution comes, I now wonder whether to provide the \$3,500 or to explain that I will subtract it from the debt. I have a sense that my mother would have wanted her bequest to be paid outright. This is an intuition about her preferences, not an inference from anything she has said or done. Should I perhaps pay a substantial portion to the nephew immediately and indicate that the rest will come in installments that can be

¹⁸ In presupposing a normal person here, I have in mind mature moral agents. I am not endorsing the strong motivational internalist view that any self-addressed moral intuition or moral judgment by itself entails motivation to act accordingly. Explanation and defense of this view is provided in my (1993).

speeded up if some of the debt is paid along the way? I don't have a good sense of what my mother would think about this idea, but it does provide some of the bequest immediately and there might be interest added (from an escrow) to what the nephew ultimately receives. I also have a sense of the *fittingness* of what I'm doing to my relationship as son. Here I feel the pull of equal treatment as both a standard of justice and prominent in my mother's expectation for distributing the funds.

8 Justice

The executorial case shows how moral standards are often clarified, or often better clarified, by considering their violations than by considering their realization. Take teaching, which heavily depends on justice. Imagine a teacher grading papers and showing clear indications of disfavoring students on, say, an ethnic basis. Does vividly imagining either case not yield a negative feeling of unfittingness, or an unsettling sense of discord, or a disturbing feeling of imbalance? Here emotion evidences injustice. Suppose, however, that we discover that the grader knows the native language of the ethnic group being graded and what looks like favoritism on an ethnic basis is actually taking account of intended meanings of English sentences clear only to skilled speakers of their authors' native language. We can imagine divided intuitions here: grading on discernible content seems just; but insisting on clarity of content *for* competent readers in the relevant language seems a reasonable requirement.

This is a case where intuitions should be confronted with hypothetical cases and various resolutions considered. There is a need for policy. The case illustrates how, in matters of personal evaluation, social justice requires antecedent clarity on rules that govern what counts as a just distribution. Initial intuitions may have some evidential value, but policy requires a reflective equilibrium between cognitions of this kind and rules to guide the activities in question. Even when such equilibrium is reached, new cases may require revision.¹⁹

9 Harm-Avoidance ("Non-injury")

A moral standard even more prominent than justice—certainly one taught to children emphatically and early in moral education—calls for non-injury. Even physical injury, despite the abundance of clear cases of it, is difficult to define. Abuse of women and children is now rampant, and much of it is not even concealed given the plethora of cultural rationalizations for it. Here moral revulsion or even moral outrage is a common response. Think of "honor killings" or harsh punishments to sustain forced child-labor. That these things are wrongs is intuitively clear; but when it comes to women who have to choose between starvation and prostitution, intuition comes into play in many ways, depending on circumstances. The term 'injury' is too narrow to apply to all these cases, which is one reason to prefer 'harm'. Harm is apparently common in such cases of prostitution; even if there is no physical injury, there is virtually always abuse.

It is the psychological realm that, even more than the physical domain, evokes many varied and conflicting intuitions. Do teachers harm (or in some way psychologically injure) stu-

¹⁹ For epistemologically informed discussion of limitations of reflective equilibrium as a way to reach justified moral judgments see McGrath (2019), ch. 2.

dents they criticize in ways that cause embarrassment or momentary distress in a classroom setting? Different hypothetical cases evoke different intuitions. Some also evoke emotions. Is criticism the norm in the institution and academic field in question, and is it confined to the point at issue? Such criticism may yield hurt feelings, but is it wrong?

Here empathy comes in; it may be an affective response or a fitting attitude or a blend of both. It may evoke intuitions of wrongness, but it may also indicate a sense of distress at the student's deflated feelings and an intuitive sense that one should later revisit the incident and bring out a positive side that may yield balance. Some criticism, of course, seems personal, or sharp-edged, perhaps in voicing and turns of phrase rather than in depth or scope of criticism. Then disapprobation is likely in an impartial observer. My intuition in some such cases is that there is wrongdoing in the form of hurting feelings—likely a transitory psychic injury, but sometimes one long remembered.

10 Beneficence

The moral standards so far considered as evoking moral intuitions have in common that they correspond to others' rights, for instance not to be lied to or injured. By contrast, our obligations of beneficence are discretionary: even if the obligations are *salient*, as in cases of suffering we are aware of and can relieve, their potential beneficiaries do not have a right—just in virtue of potential beneficiary status—to our doing something for them. Even in Good Samaritan cases, in which the need for help is both salient and urgent, there is no such right against passers-by with no special relationship to the wounded person.

Suppose you see a car slide off the road. You slow down and see no movement. You are not medically trained, and stopping has some danger given the slippery conditions and limited parking space. You feel pulled to help, at least by observing so that you can report the urgency of the accident by phone. But you realize that there is danger in stopping and venturing out with neither boots nor gloves. Your consciousness may be mixed: you have both an intuition of an obligation to help and a sense of danger you should avoid. You now park near the car and watch. You see no movement. The sense of obligation to venture toward the car intensifies, but you decide to call for emergency service first. You are told that weather conditions may delay help for an hour. It may now seem that you must go to the car. This circumstantially elicited intuition passes into a moral judgment with a correspondingly stronger sense of motivational pull toward action. Approaching, you find a man apparently unconscious and a trapped child sobbing. The doors are locked, and the engine is running, which might cause fire or fumes. Should you break a window? Flag down a car first? Each option you consider evokes an intuitive sense of rightness or wrongness. Such intuitions may or may not yield actual judgment. My strongest intuition is that one must get the child to safety.

Charities provide a contrasting case—beneficence at a distance. The more details I reflect on in relation to a good cause, the clearer and, often, stronger, my intuitive sense that I should give. Starvation in other parts of the world is a *ground* of an obligation to relieve it. Viewing pictures of emaciated children, it seems to me that I should. There need be no inner voice saying this; there might just be, perhaps mingled with an empathic distress, a sense of what I ought to do. Reading about threatened voting rights also evokes a disturbing sense of need and a feeling of obligation to help. In these cases, the intuitive sense that I should

contribute can be fueled by indignation. In the end it may seem to me that I should divide donations among a number of causes. As I lay out a set of amounts, I may adjust proportions to yield what seems a more effective or equitable pattern. This is one way justice affects beneficence. Here one can have a kind of objectual intuition whose object is a pattern that evokes a sense of normative satisfactoriness.

The portrait of moral intuition so far painted has been provided partly through narratives that correspond to the kinds of episodes in human life that call for moral judgment or indeed action. These episodes may be as brief as making a deathbed promise or as extended as discovering an accident and reflectively determining how to assist its victims. As episodes proceed, their phenomenology may change dramatically. Such episodes may also evoke a quite different phenomenal response when experienced in memory. It is indeed often memorial review of our experiences that yields intuitions and conclusions that partly form our general moral standards. How this occurs is sketched in the next and final section.

11 The Generalizability of Moral Intuition

Moral experiences come in many forms. As already illustrated, many of these are emotional, sometimes prominently, as with outrage on seeing a violent mugging; sometimes subtly, as with the mingled disquietude and anxiety when observing a hostile interview by police. Intuitions often accompany moral experiences of these kinds, and they have a phenomenology partly determined by the subject's responsiveness to their content in the situation. The situation may be recollective, contemporaneous, perceptually witnessed, projected as a possible line of action, or purely hypothetical, as with abstract reflection. The intuition may be a cognitive seeming with moral content and may yield belief or, sometimes, raise doubt; it may be a representation of a pattern; and it may embody a *valence*, as a felt sense of obligation to render aid.

The valence that accompanies many moral intuitions tends to yield motivation to act in accord with the content of the intuition. The agent commonly has a sense of groundedness—of the cognition's having some relevant moral basis, such as a promise, an injury, or a need of someone nearby. This sense of groundedness goes with, and arguably largely explains, a sense of fittingness of the content of the intuition to the grounds supporting it and the act(s) that it in turn may support. It is tempting to think of cognitions embodying or integrated with this sense of groundedness as tacitly inferential. It is true that they may give rise to a disposition to infer their content from a clear statement of the grounds, but responding to those grounds does not require either entertaining them propositionally or drawing any inference. Intuitions are more like aesthetic responses to a pattern than like conclusions of inference from premises.

In morally sensitive mature agents, moral intuitions often exhibit an element connected with the grasp of a relation between the grounding elements and the content of the intuition, for instance between seeing the sobbing child trapped in a wrecked car and the intuitive sense that one should quickly rescue the child. I refer to a sense of the implicit generality of the content. For me, as particular as the perception of the sobbing child is, I have a general sense that a *child* in these circumstances must be brought to safety. This combines a sense of the particular moral demand with a realization that it is of a kind that calls for the relevant

kind of action. The valence and motivation are particularized; the awareness of its resting on a certain kind of ground provides a sense of the kind of obligation in question.

Episodic intuitions commonly pass into dispositionally retained cognitions. An intuition that I should compensate a child injured by my car but through no fault of my own may stay with me long after the accident, but may become occurrent only when I drive through the same neighborhood. Its phenomenology may vary with many factors. I could reimagine the incident when driving through that fateful street. I could think of myself braking faster than I did. I could recall being told to watch for children. Some elements entering consciousness might evoke remorse; others might confirm my intuition that beneficence is fitting but not morally required. In time, moreover, I will have new information and new obligations.

The acquisition of new information may be an occasion for a kind of testing of the original intuition. The recollection of an episodic intuition tends to be less psychologically coercive—e.g. less likely to produce judgment or action—than it might be in the situation that elicits it, and we often reconsider what did not seem doubtful originally. Does the original intuition survive time and distance? Does *p* still seem true in the new context? Does the intuition give way to competing intuitions or to judgments favoring competing claims on one's allegiance? The answer may come easily as one thinks of the kinds of details just noted. But reflection may also be needed, and one could form a higher-order intuition that, say, one was right to begin with. This intuition could lead to belief and judgment expressing it. But even where an intuition arises on considering lower-order competing cognitions, and even if one reaches reflective equilibrium, the higher-order intuition (or surviving original intuition) may not produce belief or judgment, or may not do so immediately. Reflective equilibrium may result in firm belief, but it can also leave one with mere confirmation of something scrutinized or even with doubt of what seemed clearly true.

12 The Epistemological Significance of Intuition

The last section indicated how moral intuitions may be responses to grounds for moral judgment and thereby not only support holding it but also yield a sense of its basis. This, in turn, may enable us to see, or may at least reaffirm, some general moral point, e.g. that one must quickly rescue an endangered child. It should be obvious, then, that intuition is an important basis of moral justification and moral knowledge. It is fallible but, in its episodic form, and when it represents one or more basic sources of justification—at least memory, sensory experience, introspection, and reason—it also confers some degree of justification. The justification in question is *prima facie* and defeasible, so the point is not that, given truth and no special underminer, intuitive justification is always appropriate to ground knowledge. But it commonly is.

Might we say, then, that intuition is indispensable for justification in ethics? It appears so, at least if we include philosophical ethics. I would stress that this justificatory role may be played by doxastic intuitions as well as by intuitive seemings; the main difference is that whereas seemings confer non-inferential justification, doxastic intuitions characteristically justify inferentially—which need not be with less probative force than the former provide.

It may seem that at least *a priori* moral knowledge must rest on intuition. Some intuitionists have apparently believed this, but on my view the basic kind of justification we have for self-evident propositions (basic in the *a priori* realm) rests ultimately on adequate under-

standing. This tends to yield intuition upon comprehending consideration of the proposition in question, but it need not, as can be seen by the challenge to Rossian intuitionism by strong particularists.²⁰

None of these limitations on the epistemic role of intuition diminishes its importance, and in the world as we know it, full-blooded moral life is not possible without intuition. In providing raw materials for thought, it does for the abstract realm something perception does for the concrete realm: it provides representations that, as responsive to grounds of justification, can in turn confer a measure of it. This facilitates the sense of falsehood and the recognition of counterexamples as well as the sense of non-inferential credibility. It can lead to *modus tollens* as well as *modus ponens*.

Testimony-based knowledge and justification are not the only cases of moral knowledge that do *not* depend on the recipient's intuition as a ground. There is also moral perception, and here we have a basis for knowledge of singular empirical propositions. They *may* be intuitive; but where one sees that (e.g.) an action is wrong, one's knowledge itself is perceptual and not a case of intuition. Still, just as perceptions can disconfirm intuitions, intuitions can lead to reassessing what one takes to be perceived.

It will be obvious that this paper takes a common-sense, anti-skeptical view on which we may have both justification and knowledge in ethics. There are some theorists who take a kind of moral truth to be possible without entailing moral realism. I have been assuming, as seems natural, that moral truth entails that some entities, such as human actions, have real moral properties. This view need not be combined with reductive naturalism in ethics, but it may be. This is not the place to explore moral realism. The phenomenology of intuition and, I suspect, moral phenomenology in general, is neutral regarding the controversy between realism and anti-realism in ethics.

Moral experiences come in many forms. Some are intuitional, others perceptual. In both cases, we have seen, there is a sensibility, a discriminative "faculty" if you like, that responds to what experience presents, something physical in the perceptual case and something intellectual in the intuitional case—even if evoked by what is perceived. Particularly in facing moral questions or in seeing morally obligatory deeds or, especially, wrongful ones, intuitions in the form of a non-inferential sense of truth may arise. Such intuitions may come from reflection on hypothetical cases as well as from observations of actual ones. Deliberation is also a common source of moral intuitions—Deliberations may of course depend on intuitions for premises but their effects may include intuitions as well as judgments. These can be responsive to evidences of right or wrong and, partly for that reason, can confer a degree of justification on the moral propositions in question. Moral intuitions may be evoked by emotion, human interaction, reflection, or perception, whether moral or not. Moral intuitions can also engender these, and, as our examples show, their evidential force need not depend on whether they are cause or effect in such interactions. They are fallible, but they are also responsive, often subtly, to the grounds in relation to which they are to be

²⁰ See Dancy (1993) for a case supporting a strong particularism. In my view he adequately understands some self-evident propositions he there mistakenly rejects, a view argued in detail in Audi (2015), which takes withholding and even disbelieving *p* to be compatible with having justification for believing it. I leave open whether the denier would, in reflecting on *p*, *tend* to find it intuitive, but rejection is compatible with that.

judged. This responsiveness may be highly discriminative, and although it is not our only route to moral knowledge it does provide an indispensable source of moral justification.²¹

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