

The Role of Moral Perception in Mature Moral Agency

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“...he might have said, if any man could have got him to talk about it, that like the morning dove, the bittern, the Indian, he had a sixth sense. What he thought of as his sixth sense was in fact only what his five senses agreed on and communicated to his mind, acting together, like an intelligence agency, to sort out, accept or reject, and evaluate the impressions that came to them.”

Vardis Fisher, *Mountain Man*

I. Introduction

Many moral theories hold that moral judgments and actions are appropriate only to the extent that they stand in an appropriate inferential relation to moral principles.¹ Such principles themselves derive their justification either from their non-inferential self-evidence, derivability from other premises, or their coherence with our larger belief system. On such an account, mature moral agents are those agents who successfully employ moral principles when forming moral judgments and actions. A number of philosophers (Blum 1991, Dancy

* Special thanks to John Bengson, who read through several drafts of this paper, making a substantial contribution to its current form. Thanks also to Ed Sherline, Marc Moffett, Susanna Goodin, and Karen Bartsch for their feedback on sections of the paper.

¹ This is the standard (if at times implicit) view underlying many, though not all, versions of consequentialist, deontological, intuitionist, and contractualist/contractarian theories of ethics. For a good discussion, see Shafer-Landau (1997).

2004, Garfield 2000, McDowell 1979/1998, Varela 1999) have offered forceful challenges to such theories, citing a host of problems with principle-based accounts of appropriate moral judgments and actions. They agree that the claim that moral judgments and actions are appropriate only to the extent that they stand in the appropriate inferential relation to moral principles is problematic, making it necessary to look elsewhere for an account of appropriate moral responses.

One such account (though certainly not the only account) is a sort of reliabilism according to which appropriate moral judgments and actions are those formed via reliable processes – processes that lead (more often than not) to true moral beliefs and right actions.² On such an account, mature moral agents are those agents who successfully employ such processes when forming moral judgments and actions.

So, what might such reliable processes be? There are several candidates. For example, some maintain that mature moral agents employ intuition (Shafer-Landau 2003). Others invoke cultivated emotions or sentiments (Jacobson 2006, Nichols 2002, Pianalto 2005, Prinz 2006, Wilson 1993). Still others appeal to skill or “know-how” underwritten by complexes of reliable dispositions (e.g., Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1991, Jacobson 2006, Varela 1999; cf. Annas 1995). While I think that intuition, emotion, and reliable dispositions are all important to mature moral agency, I also believe that there is another reliable process, namely, moral perception, which deserves special treatment. Accordingly, my goal in this paper is to argue that moral perception is distinct from the aforementioned processes, and that it plays a central role in mature moral agency.

To do this, I must first provide reasons to think that there *is* such a thing as moral perception and that it is distinct from other reliable processes, such as moral intuition, moral emotion, and certain moral dispositions. So, in §2 I provide reasons to believe that there are genuine perceptual states that have moral (or morally relevant) content, and thus we are not simply using the notion of moral perception loosely or metaphorically, as some have argued. In §3, I defend the view that moral perception plays a central role in mature moral agency by invoking empirical research regarding the importance of refined perception to performative expertise. I end, in §4, by considering a worry about the scope of moral perception, showing that while there are certainly limitations to moral perception, such limitations do not undermine moral perception’s central role in mature moral agency.

² See Shafer-Landau (2003) for an extended defense of a reliabilist moral epistemology.

II. The Nature of Moral Perception

A number of philosophers have discussed the importance of moral perception (e.g., Blum 1991, Fortenbaugh 1964, Harman 1977, Holland 1998, Jacobson 2006, McDowell 1979/1998, McGrath 2004, Nussbaum 2001, Starkey 2006) in the formation of moral judgments and actions. Many of these philosophers hold that mature moral agents are able to accurately perceive what is morally the case – for instance, they can see that a given action is cruel, they can see that they ought to (or ought not) perform a particular action, and so on. For example, McDowell (1979/1998, 73, emphasis added) claims that “occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: *one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way.*” Likewise, Blum (1991) argues that possessing a host of moral principles and good deliberative skills will do a moral agent no good unless she accurately perceives the moral situations that confront her as *moral* situations. What is more, she must be able to accurately perceive that there are (or are not) certain moral features present in order to determine how to respond.³

Consider, for example, Blum’s discussion of John and Joan, who are both riding a subway train: it is a fairly full train, they are sitting next to one another, and there is a woman standing nearby holding two full bags of groceries. She is clearly in distress, the weight of the bags rapidly becoming difficult for her to manage comfortably. John, while generally cognizant of the woman’s presence, does not notice her distress; Joan, on the other hand, clearly perceives that the woman is in significant discomfort. As Blum (I think rightly) argues, the difference in John’s and Joan’s perception of the woman is of moral significance: John fails to perceive that a morally relevant feature (the woman’s distress) is present, while the fact that it is present is perceptually salient for Joan.

This point brings to light the importance of moral perception when it comes to the formation of appropriate moral responses. Consider the moral judgments and actions with regards to the woman that John and Joan are likely to form: John fails to perceive that the woman is in distress and that he ought to come to the woman’s aide (and thus, will likely fail to do so), whereas Joan’s perception that the woman is in distress “already provides her with a reason for action”

³ Blum (1991, 701) writes, “An agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest of standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation. Yet unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation will be for naught and may even lead her astray.”

(Blum 1991, 703). This is important: Joan's perception that the woman is in distress and requires assistance (assuming that it constitutes the only relevant moral feature of the situation at hand) is sufficient, *ceteris paribus*, for her to form an appropriate moral response.

Of course, this raises the question of exactly how we are to understand the use of perceptual verbs, such as 'perceives' or 'sees', in a moral context: for instance, how we are to understand the claim that Joan *sees* that the woman on the subway is in distress? Some philosophers hold that the claim that there is such a thing as moral perception cannot be taken seriously – that we should not interpret talk of perception in moral contexts literally. For example, Jacobson (2006) argues that any such use of perceptual verbs must be purely metaphorical, while McDowell (1998, 133) argues that any appeal to a perceptual model of moral judgments "is no more than a model", and thus not to be taken literally.

How then are we to understand moral perception? McDowell (1978/1998) attempts to cash out moral perception in terms of a developed "sensitivity to reasons". On McDowell's view, to "see situations in a certain distinctive way" is not to enjoy genuinely perceptual states with moral content, but rather to be sensitive to reasons present in the situations one encounters. Jacobson (2006), on the other hand, holds that references to moral perception are merely disguised appeals to emotion. On Jacobson's view, we don't actually *see* that an action is cruel – rather, we *feel* it. That is, there are no genuinely perceptual states with moral content; far to the contrary, we "see" the demands of moral situations by *feeling* them in virtue of having certain cultivated emotions and sentiments.

A third suggestion has been made by Starkey (2006), who proposes that we understand the term 'moral perception' not as referring to perceptual states with moral content, but rather as referring to *any* perceptual states that possess the property of being morally appraisable (e.g., commendable). Thus, Starkey would hold that Joan's perception that the woman is in distress is a case of moral perception not because it is a perceptual state with moral content, but because it is a perceptual state that is morally commendable. Of course, on this view, John's failure to perceive that the woman is in distress would likewise be an instance of (Starkeyian) moral perception, for it is a perception that is morally criticizable. In effect, this view avoids the difficult task of interpreting claims such as that Joan sees that the woman is in distress by focusing our attention instead on ordinary perceptual states whose content happens to be morally appraisable.⁴

⁴ Blum, as far as I can tell, is silent on the issue of how we ought to understand moral perception.

Unlike Starkey, I believe it important to acknowledge that Joan's perceptual state is importantly different from John's (namely, hers is a case of moral perception while his is not), and we must therefore attempt to interpret the claim that Joan sees that the woman is in distress. And unlike McDowell and Jacobson, I believe that this claim is to be interpreted literally: in my view, moral perception consists in genuinely perceptual states with moral content.⁵ As I see it, our talk of moral perception is neither a model nor metaphorical: it makes perfect sense to speak of moral agents genuinely *perceiving* an action as (say) cruel or perceiving that they ought to (or ought not to) perform a particular action.⁶ To argue for this view, I will show that attributions of moral perception cannot be understood as attributions of moral emotion, sensitivity to reasons, or moral intuition.⁷ Indeed, I believe that although states of moral perception may

⁵ On this view, we may perceive something *as* morally relevant (or as having a particular moral feature) or we may perceive *that* something is morally relevant (or that something has a particular moral feature). Accordingly, this account of moral perception may be understood as attributing moral *aspect*-perception (perceiving *a* as *F*), as it is sometimes called, or *factive* moral perception (perceiving that *a* is *F* or perceiving *a* to be *F*), while remaining neutral on *objectual* or *property/trope* moral perception (perceiving *o* or perceiving *a*'s *Fness*). While I believe that the last is actually quite pervasive, I take it that a defense of this view would require a certain moral metaphysics and a certain thesis about experiential content, neither of which I have the space to defend here. For our purposes, it is enough to speak of an agent *seeing* an action *as* cruel, *seeing that* an action is cruel, or *seeing* an action *to be* cruel. Accordingly, I will only discuss instances of aspect and factive seeing, which I will treat interchangeably – though there are of course some important differences between them. For one, factive perception entails success while aspect perception does not – e.g., it is possible to see *a as F* even if *a* is not *F*, but it is not possible to see that *a is F* (or to see *a to be F*), if it is not the case that *a is F*.

⁶ One might object that we only perceive shapes, colors, and the like and the fact that an action is cruel is too “complex” to be the content of a genuine perceptual state. However, there is good reason to think that facts of various levels of complexity are capable of being perceived (e.g., perceiving that someone is a soldier, that the computer is on, that the dress is expensive, or that the action is cruel): see, e.g., Peacocke (2004).

⁷ Wisniewski and Jacoby (forthcoming), who also put forth an account of moral perception, argue that it must also be considered distinct from moral attitudes (in the everyday sense of ‘attitude’) and judgments.

not be *experiential* states,⁸ there are good reasons to think that moral perception is a genuine form of perception.

2.1 *Moral perception as emotion*

Jacobson (2006) holds that, strictly speaking, we do not *see* the demands of moral situations – rather, we “see” them by *feeling* them (i.e., in virtue of having certain cultivated emotions and sentiments). While I certainly agree with Jacobson that the emotions play an important role in mature moral agency, I nonetheless want to argue that we do not typically *feel* what is morally relevant – instead, we perceive it.

One reason to think that moral perception is distinct from moral emotion is that what we feel is often a *reaction* to (or the result of) what we perceive. Suppose that a mature moral agent (Joan) is witnessing a group of boys kicking an old dog that cannot defend itself. While it makes sense to say that Joan perceives that the boys’ actions towards the dog are cruel and that Joan feels, say, extreme disapproval towards the boys’ actions (as well as something like indignation towards the boys and compassion for the dog), it would be mistaken to say that Joan’s perception that their actions are cruel *just is* Joan’s disapproval towards their actions. To see this, consider the following question: why does Joan feel disapproval? The answer, I take it, is that Joan feels disapproval towards the boys’ actions because she *perceives* that their actions are cruel. This explains how it is that Joan is in a position to feel disapproval towards the boys’ actions. If she did not perceive such a thing, then she would be in no position to feel disapproval: it is only because she has perceived that the boys’ actions are cruel that she can feel disapproval towards those actions. In this way, Joan’s perception that the boys’ actions are cruel explains why she feels disapproval: she feels disapproval towards the boys’ actions *because* she perceives that their actions are cruel.⁹

⁸ Though there is actually reason to think they are (or, at least sometimes can be). See, for example, recent work on moral phenomenology (e.g., Horgan & Timmons 2005).

⁹ Cuneo’s (2003) discussion of moral perception suggests that in addition to perceiving that the boys’ actions are cruel, Joan would also perceive that those actions merit disapproval. If this is correct, then perhaps Joan feels disapproval towards the boys’ action because she perceives that their actions merit disapproval. In such a case, the explanation would still invoke moral (or, more broadly, normative) perception. It should be clear that such an explanation is asymmetrical: while Joan’s perception can explain her disapproval, her disapproval cannot explain her perception.

One might respond to this by saying that what Joan actually *perceives* is just that the boys' are kicking a dog and that the dog is old and not fighting back. It is the perception of these non-moral facts that generates a feeling of disapproval – and it is this feeling of disapproval that constitutes Joan's "perception" that the boys' actions are morally bad (cruel). But, what this response fails to give us is an explanation for why Joan's perception of these non-moral facts should result in a feeling of disapproval in the first place. That is, Joan's perception that the boys' are kicking a dog and that the dog is old and not fighting back does not by itself explain why she feels disapproval. After all, there may be circumstances in which perceiving the kicking of an old dog would not arouse a feeling of disapproval. What explains her feeling disapproval is her perception both that the boys' are kicking an old, defenseless dog *and* that their actions *are cruel*.

Another reason to think that moral perception is distinct from moral emotion can be found by looking closely at attributions of moral perception, which appear to be inequivalent to attributions of moral emotion. Consider, for instance, the following statements:

- 1) Joan sees that the boys' actions are cruel, but she does not feel disapproval towards them.
- 2) Joan not only sees that the boys' actions are cruel; she also feels disapproval towards them.

If perceiving that an action is cruel is indeed the same thing as feeling disapproval (or some other such moral emotion) towards that action, then (1) and (2) would be problematic: (1) would be internally inconsistent and (2) would be redundant. Yet, we can easily imagine situations in which both (1) and (2) would be fine, indicating that the perception and the emotion are distinct.

Consider also the following:

- 3) Joan sees that the boys are kicking an old dog and that their actions are cruel.

If attributions of moral perception just are attributions of moral emotion, then (3) is unacceptable: the psychological relation that Joan bears to the fact that the boys are kicking the old dog (namely, genuine perception) is one that Joan could not bear to the fact that the boys' actions are cruel. Yet, (3) is fine, which indicates (*contra* Jacobson) that the verb 'sees' is being used to mark two genuinely perceptual states. The only difference is that the second conjunct, unlike the first, includes a perceptual state with moral content – hence, it marks *moral* perception.

In short, moral perception appears to be distinct from moral emotion: moral perception consists in *perceptual* states, not emotional states. Of course, there are reasons to think that moral perception is intimately linked (at least in mature moral agents) to emotion. Barring some non-normal conditions such as chronic

depression, moral perception should elicit a certain emotional response. Thus, Joan *will* feel disapproval for the boys' actions, insofar as she reliably responds emotionally to the presence of cruelty. But, as noted above, in order to respond emotionally to its presence, she must first accurately *perceive* that it is present. Given this, and the fact that attributions of moral perception are clearly inequivalent to attributions of moral emotion, it is safe to conclude that moral perception is not reducible to moral emotion.

2.2 *Moral perception as sensitivity to reasons*

McDowell holds that references to moral perception are to be understood in terms of the notion of being sensitive to reasons, where this picks out an ability to discern the reasons that are present in a situation, this ability being basically a reliable complex of dispositions to respond to situations in the way that those situations call for. On this view, to perceive the boys' actions as cruel is to be sensitive to certain reasons¹⁰, these reasons being reasons for right action. As Starkey (2006, 84) notes, for McDowell "moral perception is defined by its relation to morally relevant action, and particularly its ability to produce such action."

There are two points to be made here. First, perceiving that an action is cruel appears to be inequivalent to being sensitive to reasons for right action so understood. For instance, one's perception that the boys' actions are cruel seems distinct from one's sensitivity to a reason to act in a certain way. It seems possible that one could truly be said to perceive that the boys' actions are cruel while simultaneously being unclear as to whether it gives you reason to act or what the right action in response to the perceived situation would be. Presumably, this is not possible if perceiving that the boys' actions are cruel is just a matter of discerning that one has reason to act in a certain way, or, more precisely, being disposed (or manifesting a disposition) to respond to the cruelty of the boys' actions in a certain way.¹¹

¹⁰ Indeed, reasons that – at least for mature moral agents – “silence all others” (McDowell 1979/1998).

¹¹ This problem cannot be solved by simply saying that moral agents who are not sensitive to reasons to act in a certain way do not have moral perception. For, while I agree with McDowell that in the mature moral agent moral perception is linked to action in an intimate way, I see no reason why agents who have not yet attained moral maturity could not, at least in some cases, nonetheless be attributed moral perception.

This brings me to my second point, which is that it seems that a complete explanation of an appropriate moral response to a moral situation, like the one confronting Joan, will typically include reference to *both* the perception that, say, the relevant action has a certain moral feature (e.g., cruelty) and the perception that one has a certain reason for action (e.g., stopping the boys' actions). Perhaps in our hypothetical example the cruelty of the boys' actions, along with other facts about the situation, such as Joan's ability to effectively intervene on the dog's behalf, generates a reason for Joan to stop the boys' actions. However she comes to have this reason, it seems quite plausible to say that just as Joan perceives that the boys' actions are cruel, Joan may *perceive* that she has a reason to stop the boys from acting in this way.¹² After all, it seems perfectly acceptable to say things like:

4) Joan sees (or fails to see) that she has a reason to act.

If this is correct, then it would seem that McDowell is mistaken not only about the perceptual nature of moral perception, but also about the perceptual nature of sensitivity to reasons.

Of course, it could be argued (on McDowell's behalf) that in statements such as (4), the verb 'sees' is actually standing in for another verb, such as 'recognizes' or 'apprehends'. This certainly seems plausible: it could be that when we say we perceive that we have a reason to act we could instead say that we *recognize* that we have a reason to act. Likewise, it could be that when we say we perceive that an action is cruel we could instead say that we *recognize* that an action is cruel. But this is not a serious problem for the view that moral perception consists of genuinely perceptual states that have moral content. To be sure, the verb 'recognize' in, say, 'Joan recognizes that everything is self-identical' does not pick out a genuinely perceptual state. But, in, say, 'Joan recognizes that there is an apple on the table', it typically does. Thus, verbs such as 'recognize' may sometimes mark genuine perceptual states. To see that the case at hand does involve a genuinely perceptual state, consider the following statement:

5) Joan sees that the boys are kicking the old dog, that their actions are cruel, and that she has a reason to stop them from doing this.

As before, (5) seems perfectly acceptable, indicating that just as we can be said to genuinely see (perceive) that the boys are kicking the old dog, we can be said to genuinely see (perceive) that what they are doing is cruel and that we have a reason to stop them from doing it.

¹² Of course, as suggested above, it may turn out that Joan fails to perceive the latter fact, though she nevertheless perceives the former fact.

2.3 *Moral perception as intuition*

Talk of moral perception occurs most frequently in connection with ethical intuitionism. Indeed, it is the association between moral perception and intuition - and, specifically, intuitionists' (Moore 1903, Ross 1930) tendency to talk in perceptual terms (e.g., one "sees" that lying is wrong) - that often gets moral perception into trouble. For, it might seem that insofar as we need to posit a distinct and purportedly "mysterious" (McDowell, 1998) faculty of intuition in order to understand, say, the claim that Joan sees that an action is cruel, we cannot grant moral perception the same epistemic credentials as other forms of perception.¹³ After all, argues McDowell (1998, 133), it is unclear "how such a faculty might work, or why its deliverances might deserve to count as knowledge."

However, even *if* moral intuition was "mysterious" and thus epistemically suspect (though my own view is that it is not), this would not mean that the same holds true for moral perception. That is, McDowell's worry poses a problem for moral perception *only if* moral perception is, in fact, moral intuition. However, I think we have good reason to think that it is not. Recall (3), which is repeated below:

3) Joan sees that the boys are kicking an old dog and that their actions are cruel.

If Joan could only "see" that the boys' actions are cruel in the same way that one can only "see" that which one intuits (e.g., that everything is self-identical), then (3) would be akin to the following statement:

6) Joan sees that the boys are kicking an old dog and that everything is self-identical.

Since Joan sees that the boys are kicking an old dog, while merely "seeing" that everything is self-identical, (6) is exposed as problematic. But, as we saw above, (3) is not problematic. So, attributions of moral perception appear to be unlike the non-literal attributions of pseudo-perception which are characteristic of statements involving reference to intuition. In order to make this point clear, consider the following statement:

7) Joan saw that the boys' kicking of the old dog was cruel, even though her eyes were closed.

¹³ Many take states of perception to justify beliefs with the corresponding content (see, e.g., Huemer 2001 and forthcoming, Peacocke 2004, Pryor 2000). Incidentally, many intuitionists, as well as most contemporary epistemologists (specifically, the majority of contemporary rationalists), deny that intuition must be a distinct faculty (see, e.g., Peacocke 2004).

This statement seems problematic, suggesting that in order to have seen that the boys' kicking of the old dog was cruel, Joan must have used her eyes. But one need not use one's eyes to have intuitions – not even intuitions regarding the cruelty of an action. Indeed, we can intuit all sorts of things with our eyes closed. It follows that moral perception is not identical to moral intuition. Thus, while intuition may play an important in mature moral agency, we must nonetheless consider its merits separately from those of moral perception.

2.4 *Moral perception as genuine perception*

I think that the foregoing discussion reveals that we have good reasons to think that moral perception is genuine perception. This means that despite suggestions to the contrary, we appear to have good reasons to grant perceptual states with moral content the same epistemic status that we grant other perceptual states. For instance, in the situation described above it is clear that Joan is justified in believing that the boys' action is cruel. Why is she so justified? Because she perceives that this is so. Indeed, Joan's perception that the boys' actions are cruel gives her the same sort of *prima facie* justification for believing that their actions are cruel as one's perception that there is an apple on the table gives one *prima facie* justification for believing that there is an apple on the table.

As I hope is now clear, allowing this does not require that we posit a faculty of moral perception whose operation is distinct from that of ordinary perception. The view that there are genuinely perceptual states with moral content, such as *that the boys' actions are cruel*, no more commits one to positing a distinct faculty of moral perception than the view that there are genuinely perceptual states with chess content, such as *that the King is in mate*, commits one to positing a distinct faculty of chess perception.

Indeed, this is the point of the quote at the outset. That the mountain man – like the morning dove, the bittern, and the Indian – has a “sixth sense” does not mean that he possesses some sixth faculty of perception. It is rather that his existing faculties of perception have been refined and developed in such a way as to enable him to reliably perceive subtle facts about the natural environment that surrounds him (facts that others might not perceive). Likewise, mature moral agents do not possess some distinct “moral sense”: their existing faculties of perception have simply been refined and developed in such a way as to enable them to reliably perceive subtle facts about the moral environment that surrounds them (facts that other moral agents might not perceive).

III. Moral Perception in Mature Moral Agency

Now, even if moral perception is genuinely perceptual and enjoys the same epistemic status as ordinary perception, this doesn't mean that it *ipso facto* plays a central role in mature moral agency. In order for moral perception to play a central role in mature moral agency, it must be the case that mature moral agents rely on moral perception to form appropriate moral responses. This requires that such agents form such responses because they perceive moral situations *as they really are*: that is, they must accurately perceive that a given situation has certain moral features and then judge and act on that basis. Along these lines, Fortenbaugh writes,

To the coward what is not formidable appears formidable, and what is slightly formidable appears exceedingly formidable. For the rash person the appearances are reversed. But to the courageous man things appear *as they really are*. (1964 78, emphasis added)¹⁴

In order to understand the role of moral perception in mature moral agency, we must explain the differences between the perceptions of the coward, the rash person, and the mature moral agent. This means that we cannot tell quite the same story for perceiving that a cruel action is cruel as we can for perceiving that, say, a red apple is red. For, barring certain physiological, conceptual, and environmental abnormalities, *everyone* sees that a red apple is red, but not everyone sees that a cruel action is cruel.

One plausible account of moral perception accommodates this fact by invoking empirical research regarding what we might call *refined perception* and the significant role it plays in the development of expertise. It is to this account that I now turn.

3.1 Expertise and refined perception

It has been argued (by, e.g., Weinstein 1993) that expertise comes in two distinct forms: *performative* and *epistemic*. Roughly, the former concerns expertise *in* or *at* a given domain while the latter concerns expertise *about* that

¹⁴ By using this quote, I do not mean to endorse the claim that we must also admit of moral *appearances* – nor do I need to. The general point holds if we substitute in ‘perception’: the coward *perceives* the not formidable as formidable, the rash person *perceives* the formidable as not formidable, but the courageous person *perceives* things as they really are.

domain. In other words, performative experts demonstrate their expertise through their skillful engagement in or at the domain in question: they create masterpieces in art, play Bach masterfully, perform incredible feats of physical and mental skill, and so on. Epistemic experts, on the other hand, dazzle us with their knowledge: they cite the names of famous painters and dates of great wars, describe in fantastic detail the major periods of classical music, discuss the mechanics of ski jumps, and so on – though they themselves may be unable to paint, fight, play an instrument, or ski.

Mature moral agency, while it clearly involves a body of knowledge about the moral domain, more importantly requires moral agents to be able to appropriately respond to the moral situations they encounter. This means that to fully understand mature moral agency, we must understand what enables mature moral agents to form appropriate moral responses – i.e., what gives them the ability to perform in the moral domain in the way that they do. Accordingly, I will focus on what empirical research tells us about performative expertise, more generally, with an eye to the question of what gives experts the ability to perform in their domain of expertise in the way that they do. I will then consider what implications this research might have for mature moral agency – and, in particular, the role of moral perception therein.

Over the last century, psychologists and cognitive scientists have extensively explored and documented the processes underlying performative expertise (see, e.g., Baltes 1997, Bloom 1986, Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, Ericsson & Charness 1994, Ericsson & Smith 1991, Sternberg & Grigorenko 2000). Their collective research efforts unite on the fact that whatever the domain – e.g., riding a bike, playing the piano, driving a car, playing chess, martial arts, nursing, and so on – expertise involves a developmental progression from novice to expert, a progression which occurs through extensive training, instruction, imitation, experience, dedication, and practice.

This body of research also agrees that one of the central components of this developmental progression is the acquisition of refined perception. One of the key differences between experts and non-experts appears to be that only the former demonstrate a full understanding of both *what* to attend to and *what* that to which they are attending *means* (the relevant sort of attention being *perceptual* attention). Apparently, experts know, perhaps implicitly, to what in a given situation they should attend, and then how to use the information they subsequently gather via perception to form appropriate responses. Novices, on the other hand, lack this knowledge, and thus the corresponding abilities.

For example, researchers using eye tracking technology have found that experts in everything from medicine, art, chess, and cartography are much more efficient and selective in their eye movements than non-experts and that what they conclude on the basis of their perception is much more accurate. In a series

of experiments, “subjects who had extensive art training tended to concentrate on finding thematic patterns among compositional elements...[and] ‘untrained viewers failed to recognize the perceptual organizing functions of symmetry’” (Solso 1997, 147). Likewise, research has found that “The patterns of eye movements produced by expert radiologists as they make a diagnosis from an X ray is far more parsimonious than that of novices” (*ibid.* 143; see also Krupinski, et al. 1993, Nodine et al. 1993, Yarus 1969), and the resulting judgments far more accurate.¹⁵

Research also shows that experts form these accurate judgments simply via perception and in the absence of conscious deliberation or inference. For instance, expert bird-identifiers (“birders”) “recogniz[e] not just individual features but clusters of features” that enable them to spontaneously identify the species of particular birds: “a quick glance, hearing the song, may be all that is needed for immediate identification”; while on the other hand, novices must “focus their attention deliberately and laboriously on noticing the identifying characteristics...and mapping them onto a particular species” (Samuels & Flor 1997, 2). Expert air traffic controllers also spontaneously identify the location of planes from “blips” on a screen. While non-experts are hampered by the need to consciously infer from the blips to the actual location of the planes they represent, experts appear to see the blips *as* planes having certain locations and speeds, enabling them to respond rapidly and appropriately to the planes’ positions and trajectories (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986). Similarly, chess experts (masters) do not appear to have to consciously infer that such-and-such a move would be best from the particular locations of the individual chess pieces. Instead, individual pieces are seen as holistically ordered arrangements or meaningful patterns, enabling experts to respond quickly with the best next move and to accurately predict future positions (Stillings, et al. 1995).¹⁶

¹⁵ Vision is not the only sense whose refinement is crucial to expertise. Research on expert wine tasting shows that other refined perceptions (in this case, smell and taste) are likewise critical for developing expertise (Parr, Heatherbell, & White 2002).

¹⁶ Interestingly, such experts are able to reconstruct the configuration of the chess pieces on the board even after only seeing the pattern for a few seconds: however, when presented with meaningless configurations of chess pieces (i.e., configurations that are not likely to occur in an actual game of chess), their ability to perceive and respond to the pieces as a holistic pattern breaks down, leaving experts no better at reconstructing the configurations than novices (Ericsson & Smith 1991). This suggests that it is their training, which allows them to rapidly identify meaningful patterns, and *not* the possession of general rules or principles, that underwrites their expertise.

In short, experts do not typically have to stop to deliberate or to infer from a set of guidelines or rules in order to determine what the relevant facts or features are, whether they are present, and how to respond to their presence or absence. They have developed the ability to perceive what is relevant in a given situation and then use the information they gather to form appropriate responses. This means that although experts are confronted with the same situation as the novice, what they *see* (hear, etc.) is, in a sense, very different: their refined perception allows them to perceive things that the novice cannot.¹⁷

One result of such refined perception is the formation of a direct link between perception and action. Experts do not simply perceive how things are, but are able to also respond accordingly – that is, their refined perception often leads to spontaneous (i.e., non-deliberative) and yet appropriate responses. What is characteristic of experts is not simply that what they perceive is much richer and more complex, but also that they respond to what they perceive appropriately without need for conscious deliberation. Just as we adapt our step to appropriately respond to upcoming changes in the physical landscape, even when we are not deliberately focusing on our movement, experts adapt their behavior to appropriately respond to changes in the domain, even when they are not deliberately focusing on how or why they should be so acting.

This link between perception and action results in automaticity, which is a crucial component of expert performance. Empirical studies have demonstrated that experts actually perform *better* on tasks when they are performed in the absence of deliberation or deliberate concentration, even in far from ideal circumstances. For example, in a series of experiments conducted by Beilock, et al. (2004), not only were expert golfers more successful than novices at hitting a predefined target under a number of different conditions, but their performance actually *improved* in those conditions that were apparently antagonistic. Specifically, expert golfers performed significantly better when under a strict

¹⁷ This increase in perceptual sophistication is in part facilitated by an increase in *conceptual* sophistication. As Johnston (2001, 209) writes, “Just what...one can be...aware of depends importantly upon one’s conceptual sophistication. You can’t be...aware of someone’s bluffing in poker unless you understand something of the rules and point of poker. Being aware of your opponent’s bluffing depends upon a pattern of directed attention and visual search into the changing scene, and this is the manifestation of an ability which is practically inseparable from the inevitably conceptual understanding of poker. Conceptual sophistication helps us to use our senses to mine the scene [to perceive such things as] his bluffing, her raising, your having a busted straight.” Of course, conceptual sophistication is not by itself generally sufficient for expertise: unless that sophistication gets put to work via perception, it does little good.

time constraint (3 seconds) or when asked to simultaneously perform tone-monitoring tasks than when they were encouraged to deliberately concentrate (“single-mindedly”) on what they were doing in the absence of both a time constraint and a distracter-task. Novices’ performance, on the other hand, both significantly improved when given ample time to deliberately concentrate and significantly worsened when placed under the time constraint or given the distracter-task.

Perhaps the explanation of these findings is that deliberation and concentration interrupt the flow of automaticity. As Bloom (1986, 74) observes, “automaticity in reading, speech, driving, piano playing, skating, or dancing is far more precise and accurate than the same processes would be if they were done with full conscious control.”¹⁸ This sentiment is in line with self-reports from experts in many different domains – perhaps most famously from athletes that, when they are at the top of their game (“in the zone”, as they say), report acting without deliberative effort, often with no sense of being in control of their actions. As one expert martial artist reports,

There is no choosing. It happens unconsciously, automatically, naturally. There can be no thought, because if there is thought, there is a time of thought and that means a flaw...If you take the time to think ‘I must use this or that technique’ you will be struck while you are thinking (quoted in Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986, 35).

In summary, for performative experts perception and action work together seamlessly, enabling a masterful *synchronicity*.¹⁹ There are few things more beautiful to perceive than someone who is “in sync” – whether it is a ballet dancer moving gracefully across the dance floor, a pianist from whose fingers flow the poignant notes of a difficult melody, a highly-skilled telemarker dipping into arcing turns on a steep mountain face, or a child who has finally gotten into the “groove” of walking. Such synchronicity is mediated by refined perception, one of the keys to performative expertise.

3.2 *Mature moral agency and refined moral perception*

I started off this section with the claim that an adequate account of moral perception must explain why it is that, while everyone sees that a red apple is red, not everyone sees that a cruel action is cruel. The answer lies in the

¹⁸ Empirical studies suggest that deliberative and automatic activities are processed differently in the brain (Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessel 2000).

¹⁹ This is a crucial part of what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as ‘flow’.

parallels between the role of refined perception in expertise and the role of refined *moral* perception in mature moral agency. So, let us examine these parallels.

To begin with, mature moral agents (like experts more generally) differ from other moral agents in that they fully understand both *what* to attend to and what that to which they are attending *means*, morally speaking. Mature moral agents know, perhaps implicitly, to what they should attend in order to locate the morally relevant facts and features and then form appropriate moral responses. Although the mature moral agent is confronted with the same situation as other moral agents, often what she *sees* (hears, etc.) and judges on the basis of her refined moral perception is very different. So, it is only to be expected that she may see that an action is cruel or unjust while others, such as the moral novice, may not.²⁰

There are other parallels as well. For example, mature moral agents do not simply perceive how things are, but also act accordingly – that is, their perceptions typically lead to appropriate moral responses. What is characteristic of such agents is not simply that what they perceive in the moral domain is much richer and more complex, but also that this perception typically results in appropriate action (McDowell, 1979/1998).²¹ This direct link between perception and action often allows mature moral agents to form appropriate moral responses with little or no deliberation. That is, for such agents there is often no need to pause and deliberate in order to determine what the relevant moral facts are; they can tell just by looking, as it were. This point is vividly illustrated by the following examples, given to us by Varela (1999, 5):

You are walking down the sidewalk thinking about what you need to say in an upcoming meeting and you hear the noise of an accident. You immediately see if you can help. You are in your office. The conversation is lively and a topic comes up that embarrasses your secretary. You immediately perceive that embarrassment and turn the conversation away from the topic with a humorous remark. Actions such as these do not spring from judgment or reasoning...

²⁰ Refined moral perception, like refined perception more generally, resembles what Starkey (2006) refers to as cognitively “thick” perception – i.e., what one perceives depends, in part, on the level of cognitive and conceptual sophistication one has with respect to the moral domain. See note 17 above, where I emphasize the importance of conceptual sophistication to expertise.

²¹ Accordingly, though Blum (1991) is correct in suggesting that refined moral perception is valuable in and of itself, nonetheless, McDowell (1997/1998) is also correct when he insists that if we are to consider an agent to be a mature moral agent, her perception must also result in right action.

Rather, they flow from a *refined perception* of how things are, morally speaking.

Indeed, deliberation in moral matters, like in performative expertise generally, can sometimes screw things up. It is preferable for moral agents to not have to deliberate about whether they have reason to stop the boys from kicking the old dog: it is a virtue to be able to simply perceive, and thereby judge, that they have a reason to stop the boys from being so cruel. This is so for two reasons. First, there is simply the issue of time: we often find ourselves in situations where an immediate action is called for, in which case deliberation serves as a barrier to the morally appropriate response. Second, and more importantly, insofar as it typically involves stepping back to consider a situation from a more general (and abstract) perspective, deliberation disrupts the automatic processing which is responsive to the richness of the information present in a given situation.²² To the extent that they need not engage in deliberation, mature moral agents can allow themselves to be guided by the subtle moral information present in the situation which they, unlike other moral agents, are able to perceive. Such perception often puts the mature moral agent in a position to respond to meaningful moral facts and features not only more quickly, but also more accurately, than other moral agents.

Finally, the self-reports of mature moral agents resemble the self-reports of experts in other domains. Specifically, mature moral agents often report acting without deliberative effort, with no sense of being in control of their actions. Rather, their actions seem, from the first-person perspective, to be *sculpted* to fit the situation -- almost as if by the situation itself. As Mandelbaum (1955, 48-49) writes:

I sense the embarrassment of a person, and turn the conversation aside; I see a child in danger and catch hold of its hand...in such cases I am reacting directly and spontaneously to what confronts me...It is appropriate to speak of "reactions" and "responses" for in them no sense of initiative or feeling of responsibility is present...We can only say that we acted as we did because the situation extorted that action from us.²³

In summary, there are a number of parallels between the role of refined perception in expertise and the role of refined moral perception in mature moral

²² This is not to suggest that sometimes such disconnection is not beneficial. But oftentimes, as in many moral situations, it is not.

²³ Additional discussion of these sorts of first person experiences of mature moral agents can be found in Colby and Damon (1992) and research on moral exemplars conducted by Walker and colleagues (e.g., Walker & Hennig 2004, Matsuba & Walker 2004).

agency. What is distinctive of refined *moral* perception is that it provides mature moral agents with the ability to perceive what is *morally* relevant in a given moral situation and then use the information gathered on that basis to form appropriate moral responses. Such moral perception is also tied to action in a way that leads to moral synchronicity, to the ability to be morally “in sync”, which is perhaps the characteristic feature of the mature moral agent. In these ways, refined moral perception plays a central role in mature moral agency.

IV. The Scope of Moral Perception

In a brief discussion of moral perception, Railton (1995, 89) points out that even if there is genuine moral perception, “we would be well advised not to make excessive demands upon [it],” for moral perception often does not, and in fact cannot, give us all of the information we need to form appropriate moral responses. To illustrate, Railton (*ibid.*, 90) gives the following example:

Suppose we come across a gang of men in khaki dress, shooting repeatedly and effectively from a moving jeep into a large herd of deer. The deer are terrified and dart about in panic. Wounded deer stumble and groan. Fawns, unable to find their mothers, stand frozen with fear. And still the guns blaze away.

Are the men’s actions wrong, all things considered? Railton observes that we cannot come to know the answer to this question via moral perception alone. This is because the moral status of the men’s actions is partly determined by many *non-perceptual* facts – that is, facts which we cannot come to know via perception. Perhaps the men just happened upon the deer and began shooting them indiscriminately, just for “kicks”. Or perhaps the men are park rangers who are attempting to kill off a herd of sick deer before they infect other herds in the area. Until we know such things, argues Railton, we cannot form an appropriate judgment regarding whether the men’s actions are wrong, all things considered.

Railton’s example illustrates an important limitation on the scope of moral perception. But there are (at least) two reasons to think that this limitation does not render moral perception wholly, or even largely, impotent– in which case it remains a genuine form of perception that may play a central role in mature moral agency.

First, while clearly there are *some* appropriate moral responses for which moral perception alone is not sufficient, it does not follow that there are *no* appropriate moral responses for which moral perception, and especially refined moral perception, alone is sufficient. Indeed, there appear to be many such responses (like the ones discussed above) for which moral perception is clearly

sufficient. What is more, there is nothing particularly special about moral perception in this regard; all forms of perception are subject to this limitation. Clearly there are some appropriate visual judgments for which visual perception alone is not sufficient. For instance, in Railton's example, visual perception alone would not enable us to form an all things considered judgment regarding the occupations of the men in khaki. It certainly does not follow from this that there are *no* appropriate visual judgments for which visual perception is sufficient. On the contrary, there remain a staggering number of appropriate visual judgments for which visual perception is sufficient (such as the judgment that the people shooting at the deer are men dressed in khaki).

Second, although in Railton's example we may be unable to perceive that the men's actions are wrong, all things considered, I think there are nonetheless other moral facts that we *can* perceive. For instance, we can perceive that the men's actions, whether right or wrong, are *inhumane*. After all, one could tell via perception that the men were wounding some of the deer without killing them, as well as generating a high level of fear and distress in the animals, and thus causing the deer unnecessary pain and suffering. Plausibly, the fact that the men's actions are inhumane can be determined via perception, just as the fact that the King is in mate can be determined via perception.²⁴ Since certain judgments and actions formed on the basis of perceiving that the men's actions are inhumane would remain appropriate even if the men's actions were not morally wrong, all things considered, the potency of moral perception is not undermined by its ability to issue a verdict only regarding the former, and not the latter, moral fact.

I thus conclude that although it may be subject to certain limitations (specifically those limitations perception in general is subject to), moral perception is nevertheless a genuine form of perception that plays a central role in mature moral agency – and, more generally, in our daily moral lives.

²⁴ Similarly, we might be able to perceive that the men have a reason to not kill the deer *in this fashion*. Even if this reason is ultimately overridden by other considerations, such as a lack of time and resources to kill them in some other fashion, the men still have some reason to not kill the deer in this fashion, and this is something that we might perceive.

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