Moral perception as imaginative apprehension

Moral Perception as Imaginative Apprehension

Abstract

Moral perception is typically understood as moral properties perception, i.e., the perceptual registration of moral properties such as wrongness or dignity. In this article, I defend a view of moral perception as a process that involves imaginative apprehension of reality. It is meant as an adjustment to the dominant view of moral perception as moral properties perception and as an addition to existing Murdochian approaches to moral perception. The view I present here builds on Iris Murdoch's moral psychology and holds that moral perception is an imaginative exploration of the particularity of concrete objects of moral reality (e.g., persons, situations, and events), rather than a registration of moral properties. I argue that such imaginative apprehension includes direct and reflective uses of imagination and that this process grounds experiential moral knowledge that serves the ultimate role of moral perception: getting a better grip on concrete objects of moral reality.

Keywords: moral perception, moral properties, imagination, Iris Murdoch, moral realism

1. Introduction

Philosophers have often argued that we can see moral reality. They typically take this to mean that we can see moral properties as the wrongness of actions or the courage of persons just as we can see other non-moral properties. My aim is to present an alternative view of moral perception that primarily involves imaginative apprehension, needed to perceive concrete moral reality.

I start by showing how most accounts of moral perception are theories of moral properties perception; perceiving moral reality is understood as the registration of (thin or thick) moral

properties.[1] I argue that these accounts correctly identify perceptual experience as an important source of moral knowledge but that they leave us with an impoverished picture of what moral perception involves; its rich phenomenology suggests that imaginative apprehensions are part of moral perception (section 2).

The relation between imagination and moral perception is barely thematized in recent discussions on moral perception, so I turn to the thought of Iris Murdoch, who stressed the importance of imagination for perceptual moral knowledge (section 3-5). I first argue that Murdoch's moral psychology involves a perceptual theory of moral knowledge according to which we understand (and improve our understanding of) moral reality by attentively looking at situations, events, and persons and re-envisioning our image of them (section 3). I then discuss how scholars have interpreted her perceptual theory of moral knowledge as a theory of moral perception (section 4). I continue by arguing that Murdoch presents a model moral perception as 'imaginative apprehension': an explorative and imaginative perception of the particularity of the concrete objects of reality we are confronted with (e.g., persons, situations, and events) (section 5). I discuss some examples to show what such imaginative apprehension involves and to clarify how imaginative apprehension relates to moral concepts. I argue that while some apprehensions might be delusional or morally pernicious, this is no reason to underestimate their crucial role in moral perception.

In the last section, I argue that moral perception includes both direct and more reflective uses of imagination that ground concrete, experiential moral knowledge (section 6). Imaginative apprehension is not simply a matter of imaginative interpretation of experience: even basic experiences of value are mediated by imagination. I then conclude this article by explaining how

[1] See, e.g., Audi 2013; Cowan 2015; Cullison 2010; Hutton 2022; McBrayer 2010; McGrath 2004; Werner 2020a, 2020b.

the view of moral perception and moral knowledge I presented here avoids two typical criticisms: (1) that moral perception theory can only make sense of simple moral scenarios and (2) that the objects of our moral perception lack typical looks. The model of imaginative apprehension can make sense of more complex situations as it includes both our relatively immediate imaginative apprehensions of the world and our efforts to perfect these apprehensions of concrete but often complex objects of experience. According to this model, moral perception is not about the registration of moral properties via recognition of typical aspects but about the exploration of the particularity of concrete moral reality.

2. Moral Properties Perception

What is mostly discussed under the heading of *moral perception* are two claims about *moral properties perception*, i.e. (a) that certain moral properties can be perceived and (b) that such perceptual experiences function as the justification of moral beliefs and knowledge claims. Cowan (2015: 166) speaks about (a) Ethical Perception and (b) Perceptual intuitionism:

> Ethical Perception (EP): normal ethical agents can and do have perceptual experiences (at least some of which are veridical) as of the instantiation of ethical properties.[2]
>
> Perceptual Intuitionism (PI): normal ethical agents can and do have non-inferential justification for first-order ethical beliefs by having ethical perceptual experiences.

Typical examples of the debate describe well-defined moral situations, see e.g., Harman's (1977: 4) burning cat and Werner's (2020a: 1) subway examples:

> CAT: Jim rounds a corner and sees a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it. Jim makes the spontaneous judgment 'What the children are doing is wrong'.

[2] There is no standard terminology. (a) is also known as 'Moral perception' or 'moral perceptualism' (Werner 2019: 1).

> Suppose you are riding on a crowded subway when a woman boards carrying two full shopping bags. She struggles both to hold her bags and to stay on her feet. Immediately, you get up and offer her your seat.

What is discussed using these kinds of examples is (a) whether we can *see* things like wrongness or neediness and whether such perceptions (b) justify our moral judgments and beliefs. (a) debates the visual presence of moral properties in the world, (b) the fact whether that presence can ground moral knowledge. Can the acquaintance with some children igniting a cat, via the perceptual registration of the moral property of wrongness, justify your conviction that setting fire to cats is wrong? The central assumption that moral perception comes down to the perception of moral properties is adopted by most accounts of moral perception. See e.g., McBrayer's (2010: 293) and Werner's (2020b: 3) characterization:

> I shall use 'moral perception' to mean perception as if some moral property or other is instantiated.

> Anyone who accepts moral perception accepts the following: (mp) Subjects can have perceptual experiences that represent the instantiation of [moral] properties.[3]

These accounts regard moral perception as the perceptual registration of moral properties, and they defend that such perceptual experience is a primary source of moral knowledge. The general idea is thus that we acquire moral knowledge by perceiving things as wrongness or neediness: it is by perceiving the wrongness of igniting a cat that we know this is a wrong action. In the words of

[3] For other examples, see Audi 2013; Cullison 2010; Dancy 2010; Hutton 2022; Watkins and Jolley 2002.

Hutton (2022: 571) "in a manner that is not reducible to rational intuition, inference, or conceptual competence."

I share the conviction of these accounts that perceptual experience is an important source of moral understanding and moral knowledge, but I think they leave us with an impoverished picture of what moral perception involves. Its rich phenomenology suggests that moral perception is more than the registration of moral properties as wrongness or neediness. Moral perception is often multilayered and complicated, being an amalgam of different elements, meanings, symbols, and metaphors representing the complexity of moral reality. This suggests that imagination is somehow part of the way we perceive moral reality. However, the relation between imagination and moral perception is barely thematized in recent discussions on moral perception that focus on the perceivability of moral properties. In his defense of perceptual intuitionism over emotional intuitionism, Hutton (2022: 583) shortly touches upon the "capacity for imaginings with moral contents" but quickly concludes he is "unaware of anyone who has explicitly defended the existence of such a capacity."[4]

In what follows, however, I will argue that Iris Murdoch's moral psychology offers a view of moral perception as a capacity to perceive moral reality via *imaginative apprehension*, i.e., an imaginative exploration of the particularity of concrete objects of moral reality one is confronted with.

[4] Hutton (2022: 583) suggests that Jennifer Church (2013) might have come close having argued that "agents perceive moral properties by imagining different ways of proceeding from the current situation, under constraints provided by the moral principles they believe." His central examples concern individuals that change their moral outlook after having a revelatory experience (e.g., Fred who gives up utilitarianism after being confronted by a fictional portrayal of slavery, an example from Werner 1983: 657–59). Hutton thinks Church's account can't explain cases as Fred's as it concerns moral change that is provoked by experience, not by principle-based inference and concludes that linking imagination and moral perception is a dead end (Hutton 2022: 584). However, the analysis seems limited as it neglects other ways imaginings can have other contents. E.g., the imaginings of future possibilities of moral action that don't have to be guided by principles (see, e.g., John Dewey's (1922) concept of 'dramatic rehearsal' and 'imaginings with moral contents' reaching beyond moral properties (which I will discuss in the following sections).

3. Iris Murdoch's Perceptual Theory of Moral Knowledge

Two questions central to Murdoch's moral psychology concern moral knowledge: How do we acquire knowledge of moral reality, and how can we improve such knowledge? She answers those questions in terms of perception: by looking at the world and re-envisioning our image of it. Her ideas of moral knowledge can be interpreted as a view of moral perception that highlights attention, love, and imagination. Let us first consider the role of attention and love.

Murdoch emphasized the moral virtue of outward-reaching attention to the world. She borrowed this idea from Simone Weil, the French Catholic philosopher who (2002: 117) defined attention as a fundamental existential orientation towards others and, "taken to its highest degree", to God. However, Weil (2002: 120) believed that all "authentic and pure values – truth, beauty and goodness – in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object." In our dealings with other persons – but also with other objects of reality, e.g., animals, plants, etc. - the attention focuses itself maximally on the person, animal, or plant, just as prayer is totally directed at the transcendent object. Weil (1992: 115) concluded that good attention is necessarily self-effacing: "the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth." Weil's idea of attention was central to Murdoch's moral theory based on moral vision and love. In *The Idea of Perfection*, the first essay of *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch (2001: 16-17) sketched the story of a mother-in-law M who comes to see her daughter-in-law D in another light. In the first part of the story, we read how:

M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind. Thus much for M's first thoughts about D.

Murdoch (2001: 17) goes on by telling how

Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question- begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D's behaviour but in M's mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.

In the first act, M is described as a mother-in-law who sees her daughter in a pejorative, haughty way. Murdoch leaves open the exact background of M, so we can imagine her perception could

have been the result of class or age prejudices (M as a bourgeoisie lady afraid that her son has married 'beneath him' or prejudices towards younger people in general). However, Murdoch's subject is not the characters' background but that what happens in M's mind (2001: 17). She argues that M, after being led by biases and misperception, offers real attention to D, which Murdoch (2001: 33) describes in perceptual terms as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." According to Murdoch (2001: 33), such loving attention is "the characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent." Love is not an emotion or affective state for Murdoch, but a mode of self-less knowledge that follows from giving real attention to something other than oneself. Murdoch (1999: 215) holds that "love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love (…) is the discovery of reality." It is the envisioning of the other as a distinct, individual, particular reality.[5]

Murdoch regarded such a loving gaze as extremely difficult to obtain and (2001: 51) argued how it is often concealed by "the fat relentless ego." We tend to reduce the surrounding world to ourselves or at least to the relation it has to ourselves. This habitual way of looking at the world results in a distorted, self-centered view of reality, which is in fact a reality shaped by a multitude of different individuals and events. A loving gaze thus implies *re-envisioning*, as M's story shows. Christopher Cordner (2016: 202) argued that such re-envisioning does not mean the acquisition of more information or details, as if M suddenly 'discovered' new hidden information about D. What has changed is not the availability of information but the character of M's perception. It is a matter of reorientation, not of detail registration:

> M does not register a greater number of details about D than previously. There is just a redescription of what was seen: D is 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but

[5] 'Something other than oneself' applies to more than just other human beings; Murdoch (2001: 83) suggested we find "self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees."

> spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on' (Murdoch 2001: 17). And not only is there no increase in the number of details actually registered, but M does not even search for more detail. The difference lies not in increased resolution of her attention to detail but in the quality or character of her orientation to D. [6]

Murdoch (2001: 22) stressed that "what M is ex hypothesi attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly." Cordner (2016: 211) added that "her seeing of D is now more responsive to D, meaning that the reality of D now shapes her seeing of D to an extent it previously did not. The way she now sees D is thus more open—more exposed—to the reality of D, and that is precisely the form or mode of her vulnerability to D."[7] Showing loving attention to someone or something means that one's vision is truly open to the object being seen.

Like contemporary defenders of moral perception, Murdoch thinks that our moral knowledge of situations, events, and persons stems from perceptual experience. M does not grasp D's true personality by matching theoretical concepts such as spontaneity and dignity with the situation. She comes to the belief that D is spontaneous and dignified by looking at her. Several authors have therefore interpreted Murdoch's perceptual theory of moral knowledge as a theory of moral perception. However, Murdoch's (2001: 22) remark that M attempts to "not just see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly" suggests that M's moral perception involves something else than

[6] Cordner (2016: 196) reacts against what he calls a "recurrent and revealing" misreading in Murdoch scholarship (he refers to Clarke 2012, Driver 2012, Millgram 2004) that understands Murdochian attention as attention to more details.
[7] Cordner (2016: 208; 213) suggests that Murdochian attention is not only receptiveness in the sense of "waiting-on, serving, answering to", but that it "involves being present to another in a way that includes 'letting oneself be seen or recognized'" as well. He agrees with Stanley Cavell (1969: 279) that "recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him" and David Velleman (1999: 3) that "love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other." Murdoch's (2001: 201) appraisal of the virtue of humility by which she concludes *The Sovereignty of Good* seems to confirm this interpretation; "The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are."

the mere identification of a set of properties (e.g., 'simplicity' 'spontaneity', 'youthfulness', …). Murdochian moral perception seems to be a somewhat different model of moral perception than the usual model of moral properties perception. Let's discuss its distinctive character by comparing two approaches to Murdochian moral perception.

4. Two Different Approaches to Murdochian Moral Perception

The first approach to Murdochian moral perception is skeptical of calling Murdoch's ideas a full-blooded theory of moral perception. In this line, Clifton (2013: 208) has argued that Murdoch's moral perception is only *moral* in the sense that the involved attention is a moral achievement, not in the sense that it can capture "concrete particulars in a moral light (…), what actions to perform or that the actions being performed are right or wrong." Seen in this way, the story of M and D merely teaches us the importance of attending to morally relevant features of reality but nothing about the perceivability of moral properties. However, this reading does injustice to Murdoch's intricate moral theory. Murdoch's moral psychology is deeply intertwined with a moral metaphysics. Her work not only discusses attention as a virtuous attitude but also addresses the structure of moral reality and how we get access to it. The second approach recognizes this latter theme. For example, Silvia Panizza (2020: 276) argues that Murdoch's work "*combines* the two senses of 'moral perception' – the moral quality of the perceiving mind and the moral quality of the perceived reality – in a way that makes them indivisible."

Panizza (2020: 273) claims that many doubts about moral perception depend on the hard distinction between non-moral, and moral properties: "true perception takes as its object a reality that is a) physical and b) non-moral. Defending some form of moral perception has generally consisted in explaining how moral properties are linked to such perceptual content proper." The idea is that physical, non-moral features of reality - e.g., colors, and shapes – relate to perceptions

in a direct way in which moral properties – e.g., wrongness and spontaneity cannot. An account of moral perception is thus expected to explain how something as wrongness can be a part of our perceptual experiences, given its different nature. Panizza identifies two types of replies that are usually given in response to this challenge.

One type invokes another element that mediates between non-moral properties and our phenomenology (she refers to "moral bridge principles" (Faraci 2017), or "habitual implicit inferences or transitions in thought" (Väyrynen 2018) or "immediate judgments" (Harman 1977)). This type of reply denies that moral perception entails the direct perception of moral properties but shows how moral properties are nonetheless part of our perceptual experiences via bridge principles, transitions in thought, or immediate judgments. It is thus argued that the moral parts of our perceptual experiences are derived from perception-independent thoughts.

The second type of reply Panizza (2020: 285) distinguishes defends the existence of direct moral perception by arguing for the supervenience of moral concepts on natural properties)[8]:

> According to supervenience views, we perceive a face or a smile, but only in virtue of perceiving the lines that make them up: the lines are still primary. In terms of moral perception, supervenience theories would say that the perception of cruelty in a gesture is dependent on the perception of the physical components of the situation, but the two aspects are perceived together.

Both types of replies to the question of how moral properties are perceived leave the distinction between non-moral and moral properties unquestioned. The first maintains that moral properties

[8] See Audi 2013 for the most explicit defense of supervenience in this context.

are of a totally different order than natural properties: they are not part of the reality we experience but come from elsewhere. The second accepts that moral properties are perceivable but holds that they are nonetheless dependent on physical properties. Panizza argues that Murdoch, however, advances a radically different view of moral perception that questions the distinction between non-moral and moral properties. Panizza (2022: 277) observes how Murdochian moral perception is "inherently conceptual" and sees no relation of supervenience between non-moral and moral properties. She demonstrates how Murdoch is convinced we see morality *through* concepts not with help of them.[9] She mentions how Murdoch (1999: 95) regarded thick moral concepts as 'dignity' or 'refinement' combining descriptive and evaluative content as "deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn round separable factual areas." Panizza (2020: 280) argues that while such concepts structure our understanding of the world, they are not projected on reality. Rather, their meaning stems from our continual engagement with the things we see:

> First, the mind forms a sense of value *through* its encounter with the world. The idea of the Good[10] is not a priori, but constantly refined based on what one sees out there (…). Second, the claim that the mind perceives reality through moral structures does not need to entail that what is perceived as a moral fact is not part of reality, or that it is a distortion of it. Rather, the mind uses (evaluating) concepts to grasp a reality which is 'out there' and separate, but which cannot be grasped independently of those structures.

[9] Several other authors have argued that perceptual experience can be penetrated by different sorts of cognitive states, e.g., moods, desires, beliefs, and concepts. See, e.g., Macpherson 2012; Siegel 2010, 2012; Stokes 2012. For accounts that explicitly argue for conceptual mediation of perception, see Brewer 1999, McDowell 1994. Panizza (2020: 283) regards the cognitive penetration argument as a confirmation of Murdoch's view that perception is "not mediated but enriched by concepts."

[10] In Murdoch's moral realism, the Good is a guiding ideal of which we have imperfect knowledge, which can be perfected by turning to concrete things in the world that function as 'hints' of the Good (see Panizza 2020: 280).

Murdoch treats concepts as deep moral configurations combining descriptive and evaluative contents that structure both the world and our perceptions of it (Panizza 2020: 285). Moral concepts as 'courage' or 'kindness' or 'selfishness' do not enter our perceptual experience via other perception-independent thought (see the first reply); those concepts resemble actual structures of reality. However, Panizza (2020: 285) argues, Murdochian moral perception does not distinguish between physical and moral properties in terms of supervenience (reply two), it "reveals a world which is both moral and physical, and inextricably so." Murdoch describes how we see the world through moral concepts, but these do not depend on a specific constellation of physical properties: they offer us equally direct access to moral reality. Let's see what this means by returning to her example of M and D. Explained in terms of supervenience, M could only see D as spontaneous and no longer as undignified when some physical things would have changed. But Murdoch (2001: 17) explains M's change of perception as an internal activity that does not depend on outer changes but on an inner development of understanding her personality through concepts: "the change is not in D's behaviour but in M's mind." M thus gets access to D's personality by perceiving her through concepts such as spontaneity and dignity.

However, it is important to stress that Murdoch (2001: 28) regards moral perception as in M's case not as the registration of sharply delineated moral properties but as an ongoing process– "at any rate an altering and complicating process"– of gradually getting a better grip on concrete instances of moral reality. Since Murdoch holds that we see reality *through* concepts, the meaning of concepts might change when we re-envision things. When M looks at D, she might improve her knowledge of D's personality and of what things such as spontaneity and dignity mean. Panizza (2020: 284) observes that such "deepening of concepts" is central to Murdoch's idea of perceptual knowledge: "experience, knowledge, familiarity with concepts and reflection modify perception and do so, importantly, in the direction of greater accuracy."

Panizza's approach to Murdochian moral perception has the merit of showing how Murdoch offers a genuine account of moral perception that is significantly different from contemporary accounts. Murdoch makes no difference between non-moral and moral properties and offers a view of moral perception as a deepening process by which we improve our knowledge of concrete situations, events, and persons, and of the concepts through which we perceive them. What I want to add to this approach, however, is the crucial and specific role of imagination Murdoch saw in the deepening process of moral perception. I will devote the remaining sections of this paper to this topic.

5. Moral Perception and Imaginative Apprehension

According to Murdoch (2001: 36), moral perception necessarily requires imagination: "I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort." Murdoch (1992: 323) regards human beings as "fantasizing imaginative animals": imagination is for Murdoch the medium through which we acquire knowledge of the world. The central place imagination takes in Murdoch's moral psychology is recognized by Evgenia Mylonaki's account of Murdochian moral perception. Mylonaki (2020: 591) emphasizes that, according to Murdoch, reality "is not intelligible except in terms of the images we make and use in the interim." Therefore, Mylonaki (2020: 594) argues that imagination is necessary to grasp the "radically historical reality of an individual." Murdoch understands human consciousness in terms of images and regards imagination as *the* vehicle by which we transform our self-absorbed way of seeing reality into a loving vision, and by which we arrive at a better knowledge of the world around us. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Murdoch (1992: 321) distinguished imagination from fantasy:

> 'We need (…) two words for two concepts: a distinction between egoistic *fantasy* and liberated truth-seeking creative *imagination*. (…) I want to see the contrast (…) in terms of two active

> faculties, one somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and the other freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation (and in art celebration) of what is true and deep.

In earlier work, she said (a little) more about what this free and creative exploration of the world implies. In *The Darkness of Practical Reason*, Murdoch (1966: 48) defined imagination as "a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual." Murdoch's reference to 'detail' should be understood differently from the interpretation of loving attention Cordner (2016: 202) rejects – that M's transformation of vision would consist in "register[ing] a greater number of details about D than previously." Murdoch (1966: 49) further characterized the imagination as an activity of image-making, as a "sort of seeping of colour." It is in this way the imagination 'builds detail': by constructing, exploring, and reshaping truthful and deep-reaching images that enhance our perception of reality.

Murdoch has a different model of moral perception. Seeing what the world is like is for Murdoch no matter of registering and identifying properties but about exploring concrete objects of reality using the imagination. I think this model can be described as 'imaginative apprehension': an explorative, and imaginative perception of the particularity of the persons, situations, and events we are confronted with. Let us consider some examples of such imaginative apprehension to see what it involves.

Martha Nussbaum offers an example in her 1985 article on the comparison between artistic and moral imagination.[11] Nussbaum (1985: 521) argues there that moral knowledge – in the sense of a

[11] Nussbaum's focus is the literature of Henry James (and *The Golden Bowl* in particular). She only refers once to Murdoch's *Sovereignty of Good* without further explanation.

Murdochian realization of the particularity of other persons and events – "is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling." Nussbaum suggests we might better look at literature than moral philosophy to understand what such perception entails. Her central example is a passage from Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*, where daughter Maggie Verver leaves her father Adam Verver to move in with her husband. To accept and support his daughter's decision, Adam has to give up the image of his daughter as a child protected by his care and authority to envision her as an autonomous, grown-up woman. Nussbaum argues how he succeeds in this by imaginatively *perceiving* his daughter as:

> a creature consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea, some element of dazzling sapphire and silver, a creature cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers, in which fear or folly, or sinking otherwise than in play, was impossible - something of all this might have been making once more present to him, with his discreet, his half shy assent to it, her probable enjoyment of a rapture that he, in his day, had presumably convinced no great number of persons either of his giving or of his receiving. He sat awhile as if he knew himself hushed, almost admonished, and not for the first time; yet it was an effect that might have brought before him rather what she had gained than what he had missed (James 1966: 476).

Adam re-envisions his daughter by using his imagination. Nussbaum (1985: 520) says about the example that "here James tells us that sacrifice is an act of imaginative interpretation; it is a perception of her situation as that of a free woman who is not bound by his wish." Morally crucial here is Adam's imaginative perception that apprehends Maggie's particular situation very precisely in a way that, according to Nussbaum (1985: 521, resembles a work of art, being

> subtle and high, rather than simple and coarse; precise rather than gross; richly colored rather than monochromatic; exuberant rather than reluctant, generous rather than stingy, suffused with loving emotion rather than mired in depression. To this moral assessment the full specificity of the image is relevant. If we had read, 'He thought of her as an autonomous being,' or 'He acknowledged his daughter's mature sexuality,' or even 'He thought of his daughter as a sea creature dipping in the sea,' we would miss the sense of lucidity, expressive feeling, and generous lyricism that so moves us here.

This passage of *The Golden Bowl* shows how imaginative apprehension is a crucial part of perceiving "a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way", to repeat Nussbaum's phrasing. Such imaginative apprehension is also central to M's perception of D. When M *sees* D, in a way that is responsive to the latter's reality, she does not grasp her as an enumeration of properties: (*D is (a) simple, (b) spontaneous, and (c) youthful.*). Rather, M perceives D's personality through a complex whole of imaginings. That, of course, does not mean D's personality cannot be *described* with these concepts (as Murdoch did) or that these properties can impossibly figure in her perception of D. The imaginative apprehension part of M's or Adam's moral perception offers the recourses needed to grasp the particularity of someone's personality and situation. It is this particularity that renders concepts as spontaneity comprehensible when they are seen as being part of someone's personality. Murdoch (1992: 330) said that the "'breeding of imagery (…) contributes to giving body to the concept." M and Adam try to grasp someone's personality and situation not by registering properties but by focusing on the concrete situations and imaginatively exploring them. A concept of independence or freedom might help Adam in perceiving who his daughter truly is. But seeing this would require imaginative apprehension. The meaning of independence depends on conglomerations of images and metaphors, e.g., "a creature consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea…" Murdoch (2001: 75) stated that "concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of

substance." Those metaphorical components are not static but dynamic, they can be deepened or altered by imaginatively apprehending the world. Because the meaning of our concepts depends on imaginative structures, Murdoch (1998: 74) spoke of the "cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by." Their meaning depends on our apprehensions of the concrete situations and persons we come across and can thus change over time. As we encounter more spontaneous persons, our understanding of what spontaneity means might develop or alter.[12][13]

One point of criticism on this view of moral perception might be that Henry James' well-crafted prose and Murdoch's made-up story are just too different from our own lives to serve as examples of *actual* moral perception. Obviously, novelists and philosophers have more time and space to provide elaborate, imaginative representations of human experience. In that sense, there is a difference between narrated and lived experiences. But why would the character of experiences written down by novelists as James as such be different from our own experiences? Is it so far-fetched to say that imaginative apprehensions are central to our own experiences in similar, maybe less elaborate, ways? Look at Harman's classic burning cat example. Jim does not see agents committing wrongdoing, he sees a group of young hoodlums. Experiencing the presence of young

[12] "We have another image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty" (Murdoch 2001: 28).

[13] An anonymous reviewer expressed the worry that Nussbaum's comparison of the literary and the moral imagination might turn an ordinary capacity as perception into a literary achievement, which would clash with Murdoch's examples of the virtuous peasant or mothers of large families by which she seems to support a virtuous, but unexamined life (Murdoch 2001: 2, 51-52). However, I think this distinction between Nussbaum and Murdoch is not correct. Nussbaum's argument is not that we should aestheticize our lives, but that moral knowledge requires imaginative moral perception. She uses Adam and Maggie's example because she believes that these experiences written down by Henry James come closer to our actual moral experiences than moral-philosophical works that emphasize abstract concepts and principles. In addition, I do not think Murdoch regards virtuous peasants or mothers of large families as unimaginative individuals, but as individuals that are virtuously engaged with the concrete objects of moral reality that surround them (e.g., the peasant's crops or animals or the mother's children). I.e., as individuals who are less susceptible to having their truth-affirming imaginings corrupted by egocentric phantasies.

hoodlums is more than experiencing a combination of *youthfulness* and *hoodlumness* (whatever that may be). Jim's experience of them involves complex images and meanings. Without those, such concepts would be to abstract to be perceivable. Or let's consider some more realistic variations of Harman's example; children trying to catch a cat, children approaching pedestrians in unpleasant ways, or parents nervously screaming at their children in the supermarket.[14] What we see in these cases is not 'wrongness' in the first place but something more complex as, e.g., *little boys that are up to something*, *kids that got nothing better to do*, or *overworked persons with full-time jobs*.

Such imaginative apprehensions do not guarantee the *best* possible understanding of the situation, let alone the *right* one. They can be heavily misguided or even morally pernicious. See for instance Panizza's (2020: 276) example of Katie Hopkins' column in *The Sun* on a sunken refuge boat off the Lybian coast:

> No, I don't care. Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care (…) These migrants are like cockroaches (…) Drilling a few holes in the bottom of anything suspiciously resembling a boat would be a good idea, too (Hopkins 2015).

These morally pernicious but highly imaginative apprehensions lie at the heart of the columnist's experience of the situation. Panizza (2020: 278) says that when she looks at pictures of the wreck and the corpses, she sees this and not what other people might see, e.g., "the reasons for the journey, what they are fleeing, their fear." As Panizza (2020: 278) observes correctly, "it seems that a key moral difference between Hopkins and, say, someone who takes the refugees as suffering human beings in need of help and rescue, lies in what Hopkins takes the refugees to *be* and in the resulting claim that they make – and the claims they do not make – on her." Imaginative apprehensions are at the base of what the refugees *are* to Hopkins. Seeing them as superfluous

[14] How many of us have ever seen a cat being ignited?

insects, as a burden one should get rid of, lies at the basis of her claims. Such observations are hard to swallow. They might even convince us to discourage imaginative apprehension and to adopt a rationalist account of moral knowledge. We might conclude that the columnist must simply apply the facts to some general moral rules to avoid being corrupted by delusional imagery. However, this would minimize the central place of imagination in moral experience. Resisting our imaginative apprehension of reality might actually hold what Cora Diamond (1991: 315) described as "the greater danger [of] '*in*attention, the refusal of adventure (…), drying up like a pea in its shell." That sense of adventure[15], Diamond (1991: 313) said,

> is closely linked to the sense of life, to a sense of life as lived in a world of wonderful possibilities, but possibilities to be found only by creative response. The possibilities are not lying about on the surface of things. Seeing the possibilities in things is a matter of a kind of transforming perception of them. The possibilities yield themselves only as it were under pressure.

What Diamond calls the transforming of perception corresponds with the imaginative apprehensions central to the examples of M and D, Adam and Maggie, and many of our daily moral experiences. Lack of such imaginative perception might lead to partial moral blindness. In his novel *In My Brother's Shadow*, Uwe Timm tells the story of his older brother, who fought as a member of the notorious SS *Totenkopf Division* during World War II. Timm (2005: 123) recounts how his brother left the family a war front diary, consisting of short notes:

[15] Diamonds article was meant as a reply to Nussbaum's article. She retraces the concept of adventure from Nussbaum's article and an earlier article on James' *The Golden Bowl* (Nussbaum 1983: 44). James (1934: 149) meant that a "human, a personal 'adventure' is "a name we conveniently give, after the fact, to any passage, to any situation, that has added the sharp taste of uncertainty to a quickened sense of life. Therefore the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions."

4 August

Back to Belgorod again. Wehrmacht can't hold it. Ivan broken through.

5 August

Russ. Aircraft attack km-long column. Gasoline-driven vehicles blow up. 2 dead and 2 wounded in Comp.

6 August

Still moving on.

Timm (2005: 140) was stunned to read only dry, factual statements:

> The diary includes no anti-Semitic remarks or stereotyped phrases like those found in letters sent from the front by other soldiers: inferior humans, filth, vermin, Russian dolts. On the other hand there is no phrase betraying anything like sympathy, no hint of any criticism of the conditions of the time, nothing to make a sudden conversion plausible. His notes show neither a killer by conviction nor incipient resistance. What they seem to express - and this I find terrifying - is partial blindness: only what is *ordinary* is recorded.

What Timm misses in the diary of his brother are observations of the lives of other soldiers, his role in this disastrous conflict, his personal motivations, and so on: concrete things we imaginatively apprehend. Reading the diary is terrifying because it seems to show what Nussbaum (1985: 515) calls "obtuseness and refusal of vison." Of course, we do not know whether Timm's brother wrote more than he left behind, nor do we know his motivations for writing it. Perhaps he was not morally insensitive at all, and did these detached notes offer him some psychological self-protection amid the brutal conditions he ended up in? But that does not take away that reading fragments like these might indeed be disturbing, exactly because they seem to lack something morally essential: the imaginative apprehensions of the particularity of the concrete moral reality that surrounds us.

Imaginative apprehensions might take morally pernicious, harmful forms, e.g., of human beings as cockroaches that should be exterminated. As Diamond (1991: 315) warned, there is no guarantee "the magic worked by a vivid imagination will not lead you into deep trouble." Imaginative apprehensions can be – to use Murdoch's terminology – fantastical. They might be conditioned by one's own desires, fears, and delusions and therefore fail to truthfully apprehend reality. Imagination must not be blindly glorified, but it's crucial role in acquiring experiential moral knowledge must not be underestimated.

6. Moral Perception and Objectual Knowledge of Reality

Defenders of moral perception realize there is more to perceptual experiences than just sensations. They argue that we see not only 'low-level' properties as colors, shapes, and sounds, but also 'high-level' properties: something being a kid, a cat, or a wrong action. [16] However, most contemporary accounts of moral perception tend to reduce moral perception to the perceptual registration of a scene in terms of properties: *I see (1) a cat, (2) fire, and (3) wrongness*. This stands in contrast to the model of moral perception I discussed above, where moral perception entails the imaginative apprehension of situations, events, and persons. Moral perception understood this way seems to comprise an *extra* step: after visually registering kids igniting a cat, we imaginatively interpret what we experience. However, there are good reasons to think that imagination is already a part of that visual experience and that it is not just an interpretation of that experience. Philosophers of mind have argued that amodal perception (the perception of occluded parts of three-dimensional objects) is enabled by mental imagery that is part of our visual experience (see Briscoe 2011; Nanay

[16] In the philosophy of perception, several arguments are offered for high-level properties figuring in perception. For defenders of philosophical liberalism, the view that perception includes complex properties as something being a pine tree or causation, see Bayne 2009, Siegel 2006. For criticism see, e.g., Byrne 2001, Carruthers and Veillet 2011.

2010). We can see the suitcase in front of us as a three-dimensional object due to imagery that complements the image of the visible surface with the representation of the hidden surfaces. There is little reason to doubt an analogous function in moral perception.[17] Just as imagination enables us to see occluded parts of objects, it enables us to experience the world not just as an assembly of appearing and disappearing one-dimensional facts, but as a place and space of value-laden objects and events. In line with Murdoch's ideas on the continuity of the moral and the non-moral, Sophie-Grace Chappell (2022: 61) argued that value experience is ubiquitous in all our experiences:

> We experience the reality of value constantly, just in experiencing anything at all. And there *is* no experience, prior to this value-laden experience, of a world without value (…) Our experience of each other, and of the world that we inhabit together, is, primordially and pervasively, a continuum of experience of things as mattering, as having importance and value.

Even very basic value experiences build on imaginative apprehensions. See the following radio interview on the Indian heatwave of March 2022. The heatwave devastated the mango harvest, one of India's major agricultural activities. Farmer Deepak Kamur expresses his despair with imaginative value experience:

> When I look on the trees, these are trees that my grandfather planted. *It's not just my living, it's my family's legacy. Tha's what I see when I look at on these trees* (Linebaugh and Lee 2022, emphasis added).

[17] Cowan (2015) provided a similar argument to defend moral properties perception.

From the perspective of Kamur's experience, it makes no sense to separate the objective, the evaluative, and the imaginative. For Kamur, growing *the king of fruits* is a profession and skill passed through three generations. A failed harvest does not only result in a significant loss of income, it means a family tradition being jeopardized. Kamur *sees* the trees and fruits as the embodiment of this tradition and wisdom; these imaginative elements are an inextricable part of how he experiences his orchard.

Kamur's imaginative apprehensions are part of the way he perceives his orchard. It is not that he must first identify his crops as being destroyed before he can interpret those destroyed crops as a jeopardized family tradition. However, the imaginative apprehensions part of his perception of the orchard might change over time due to later experience and reflection**.** Moral perception links perception with reflection. It can be direct, providing clear imaginative value-laden images. But as it reaches further than the perceptual registration of properties, it often is a process, rather than a moment, where imaginative apprehensions develop as our experiential moral knowledge grows. Theories of moral perception as moral properties perception mostly describe perception as direct perception, and it is criticized for that. McKeever and Ridge (2006: 78) observed that "the perceptual model" (i.e., moral properties perception) is

> less plausible for cases involving more controversy and complexity. I may be able to 'just see' that killing a small child for fun is wrong but unable to 'just see' whether abortion near the end of the second trimester would be wrong in a case of pregnancy due to rape where the child would suffer from a serious form of mental retardation and where the father opposes aborting the child.

This criticism makes sense. There are situations where we rather effortlessly see what is going wrong: killing a small child for fun and igniting a cat on purpose might be two examples. However,

lots of situations are more complex and require more imaginative effort. That is the reason why Murdoch (2001: 23) insisted that moral perception is "essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible" and that a realistic approach must "built in the notion of a necessary fallibility." And we are used to this dynamic of perfecting moral perception, even concerning seemingly 'simple' contexts. As Van Grunsven (2022: 288) observes,

> Perceiving persons as moral subjects is at once incredibly easy *and* incredibly difficult; it is something we do nearly effortlessly and successfully all the time without giving it much thought *and* it is something that often requires effort and that we fail at all the time (also often without giving it much thought).

Moral perception includes both our relatively immediate imaginative apprehensions of the world and our efforts to transform or perfect these apprehensions. Both aspects are interwoven in moral experience: the perception we have of a struggling lady on the tram builds on us being-in-the-value-laden-world and thus on previous experiences. As Chappell (2017: 250) summarized her project of approaching moral philosophy from within moral experience, "experience comes first."[18] Not in an empiricist way of 'first', where small, atomistic sense-perceptions are the building blocks of our knowledge, but more familiar to the idea of the hermeneutic circle. Just as *verstehen* always takes place in a context where there is already an understanding of that context, moral experiences take place against a background of earlier experiences. It is thus evident that moral knowledge is grounded in moral perception. But this type of knowledge, which Chappell calls objectual knowledge, comprises more than recognizing moral properties. Rather Chappell (2017: 288) regards it as a growing knowledge of particular situations, events, and persons directed at the sense-making of moral reality. It is not a scientific mastery of the different features of the object but

[18] See also Chappell 2009, 2014, 2022.

"something that requires humility, patience, persistence, imagination, and resourcefulness from the inquirer."[19] This highly concrete knowledge develops through experience and thus builds on previous experiences. This view of moral perception and moral knowledge avoids the 'typical looks' objection raised in the moral perception debate, formulated by Reiland (2021: 314) as follows:

> moral properties don't have typical looks and (…) more generally, things that don't have a typical look can't be perceptually recognized at all. For example, my favorite things lack a typical look. Some look one way and others look another. Similarly, wrong acts lack a typical look: there is nothing visually in common between the hoodlum's igniting a cat, a man cheating on his wife and corporate fraud.

Reiland objects to the usual model that regards moral perception as the registration of moral properties. Therefore, he argues that moral perception would require the perceptual recognition of the typical aspects of those properties: that if we perceive wrongness, we must be able to recognize its typical features, just as we register something being a chair as having the typical features of having three or four legs and a surface to sit upon. Reiland's worry about 'wrongness' or 'favoriteness' is correct. By themselves, those terms are simply too abstract to have typical looks. However, the explorative Murdochian model of moral perception regards moral perception not as the registration of moral properties via recognition of typical aspects but as the exploration of the particularity of concrete situations, events, and persons that constitutes

[19] Mylonaki distinguishes a Murdochian view of moral perception from what she calls object views (what I call accounts of moral properties perception here). Mylonaki (2019: 285) argues that, on a Murdochian view, moral perception is about "cognizing an *individual* reality (a reality graspable in historical and non universalizable concepts) and not an *object* (a reality graspable in universal terms)." We share the same idea that moral perception is not about registering a set of well-delineated moral facts but about getting a better grip on what I call concrete objects of moral reality or what she calls an 'individual reality'. So when I use the term 'object', I simply refer to Murdoch's (2001: 17) phrase of M being capable of "giving careful and just attention to an *object that confronts her*" (emphasis added). Chappell's (2017: 284) notion of objectual knowledge should be understood in a similar way, as "knowledge of particular things."

objectual moral knowledge. The hoodlums you see, the corporate fraud or cheaters you are confronted with, the daughters(-in-law), refugees or soldiers you meet; those are the primary objects of moral perception. We perceive the particularity of such concrete objects of moral reality not by searching for typical aspects, but by imaginatively exploring their reality. It is only in such a context that concepts as 'wrongness' can contribute to what is the primary function of moral perception: gradually getting a better grip on concrete moral reality.

7. Conclusion

It is true we can see moral reality and that our knowledge of moral reality stems from perceptual experience. However, I have argued in this article that such moral perception and knowledge of moral reality crucially involve imaginative apprehension. The view of moral perception I presented here is an alternative to the explanation of moral perception as the registration of moral properties. I used Murdoch's theory of perceptual moral knowledge to argue that moral perception is rather a deepening process of imaginatively apprehending persons, events, and situations. This view considers concepts as 'wrongness' or 'dignity' not as sharply delineated properties we register and then imaginatively interpret but as configurations of moral reality that are understood through an imaginative, continual engagement with the concrete objects of moral reality we experience.

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