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Seeing What's Right and Wrong: Toward a Perceptual Moral Epistemology

Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation develops and defends the claim that our epistemic access to moral properties is grounded in *a posteriori* perceptual experiences. It is divided into two parts. In part I, I present the epistemic access problem for realist moral epistemology, and then argue against several *a priori* attempts to resolve the problem. I begin by defending an understanding of evolutionary debunking arguments according to which the problem is grounded in a lack of epistemic access to *sui generis*, non-causal moral facts. Next, I argue that even the most sophisticated versions of reflective equilibrium fall victim to the “garbage in, garbage out” objection which besets coherentist theories more generally. I then survey the most influential other *a priori* approaches to epistemic access. I conclude that each of them is victim to some variation of the same dilemma: Either they fail to ensure epistemic access, or they succeed by providing epistemic access to the wrong properties—viz. not the robustly normative ones.

In part II, I defend a wholly *a posteriori* moral epistemology according to which our epistemic access to the moral properties is via perceptual experience. I begin with a positive argument that moral properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience, making use of the “method of contrast” found in the philosophy of perception literature. Next, I defend the foundationalist credentials of the perceptualist view in light of the objection that moral experiences will be epistemically dependent on prior background (moral) beliefs. I claim that the epistemic dependence of these moral experiences depends on the nature of influence the prior beliefs have and that the influence is not of the problematic sort. I then discuss the role of emotions in generating moral perceptions. I argue that emotions play an essential role in moral perceptual experiences, but that this is compatible with foundationalism and perceptualism. Finally, I return to the issue of epistemic access, arguing that the perceptual view provides an explanation of our epistemic access to the moral properties.