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## MORAL PERCEPTION, COGNITION, AND DIALOGUE

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The aim of the paper is to analyse the concept of moral perception. Moral perception gets characterized as a distinctive, non-inferential moral response to concrete situations. In order to relate moral perception with a suitable model of moral cognition the position labelled morphological rationalism is elaborated. Moral judgment follows a dynamical model of reasons, according to which reasons are situated in an agent's structured morphological background, chromatically illuminating the judgment. The key claim is that such a model is particularly well-suited to accommodate moral perception. From such a perspective some practical implications are elaborated (disagreement, intercultural dialogues).

**Keywords:** cognition, dialogue, disagreement, moral judgment, moral perception, morphological rationalism, reasoning.

### Introduction: moral perception

One possible way to understand moral perception is evident from a famous “burning cat” example by Gilbert Harman. “If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong” (Harman 1977: 4). Although Harman goes on to undermine the observational evidence and relevance of the presupposition of the existence of moral facts for ethics, this quote can serve us properly for characterization of moral perception. One

crucial thing in characterizing moral perception is its *non-inferential* character, i.e. we seem to form our moral impression (judgment) without any explicit prior stepwise moral reasoning, in which our final judgment would be the conclusion. It is not that we are not attentive and responsive to morally relevant considerations or reasons that are present; on the contrary, we are clearly responding to the unnecessary suffering and maliciousness involved in the situation. We are also usually able to provide justification for our judgment that would appeal to some general moral principles and use reasoning proper to develop a line that leads to our initial conclusion. It is just that in such situations some

sort of moral perception or moral seeming was a direct basis of our judgment.

Let us now move to another, different case of moral perception. Iris Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good* discusses a case of a mother in law (which she names M) and her attitudes towards daughter-in-law (named D).

“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 [...] M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters [...] 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 [...] M’s outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters” (Murdoch 1970: 16–17).

This example is much more complex, because it not only refers to a more subtle and nuanced moral perception, but because it also raises the question about the value of moral perception that Murdoch is trying to defend. Regarding the second point, since there is no change in the behaviour of M towards D (it is not that M acted or responded towards D inappropriately before this change in her mind; we can also stipulate that her motives were good), this shows that when assessing both “stages” there is something further to assess morally and this is precisely the proper moral perception, moral vision, which is good in itself and that “the value of seeing things aright does not derive from the actions to which such sight leads” (Wisniewski, Jacoby 2007: 231–232) or might lead. The stress for Murdoch is on seeing lovingly and justly.

Moral perception can be defined as a more or less direct response to a person, act, or situation that we are confronted with, by which we identify, interpret and organize morally relevant aspects represented to us in a certain way and could serve as a basis for our moral judgment. Thus one can say that moral perception is an (appropriate) response to a set of natural properties, which are grounding moral properties. Moral perception can be in this way seen as a basis for moral judgments involving distinct moral perceptual experience, which can justify our moral beliefs in a similar way perception in general justifies beliefs. By it we can gain moral understanding, it can provides us with justification and we get a sort of direct acquaintance with the subject. This process is not inferential. “Our responses to persons and their deeds, like our responses to paintings and sonatas, may be very finely adjusted to myriad perceptible properties without our drawing a single inference” (Audi 2013: 54). This definition of moral perception is intentionally not committal to e.g. existence of moral properties or moral facts or, for that matter, the existence of a special faculty for moral perception in order to avoid possible objections to these. It is general and neutral enough to be able to grasp the core of the idea, which can then be further developed.

Moral perception is also connected to moral imagination as related moral phenomena that can provide us moral insight and transcends what we can perceive; it can combine various elements and alter them freely. All this then evokes our intuitive responses to real or imagined acts, cases or situations. It can aid our moral reasoning deliberation and assess the relevant alternatives that we have at hand. It helps us to go beyond our current position and attitudes, and also to empathize with others. There are several open question regarding the phenomenon of moral perception. In what follows the paper will address the question of the appropriate model of moral cognition that could best accommodate it.

## Moral perception and models of moral cognition

In this section *morphological rationalism* (also *chromatic rationalism*) will be defended as a model of moral cognition against two competing alternatives (traditional rationalism and social intuitionism). Morphological rationalism is an overall view concerning moral cognition. Regarding psychological aspects it claims that moral judgment follows a dynamical model of reasons, according to which reasons are situated in an agent's structured morphological background, chromatically illuminating the judgment (Horgan, Timmons 2007, forthcoming). In this way reasons figure in judgment formation, although not being explicitly represented or considered as a part of the process of moral reasoning. As such morphological rationalism represents an interesting base for an overall account of moral judgment, including its phenomenological, epistemic and other aspects.

The dominant model of moral cognition has so far been *traditional rationalism*. In line with this rationalistic tradition Robert Audi (2006) first defines reasoning as an inferential process that proceeds from one set of propositions to another by means of deductive or (broadly) inductive steps and he defines judgment as a result of this process. Following this general characterization moral judgment could then be understood as an outcome of such reasoning process in which one explicitly represents general moral considerations and facts about the particular case at issue. Such a view undoubtedly falls within the broadly rationalist approach to moral judgment, according to which moral judgments predominantly result from genuine moral reasoning starting with basic principles or with general moral assumptions and proceeding to concrete judgments about particular cases. According to rationalism "moral reasoning [...] is a conscious process in which one infers a moral judgment from some information that one takes to be morally relevant" (Horgan, Timmons 2007: 281). This is a very narrow view

of moral judgment, especially in the light of phenomenology of direct judgment that points into the direction of an agent often falling moral judgment relatively instantaneously, without a conscious reasoning process behind it.

To this traditional model an alternative labelled *social intuitionism* (Haidt 2001; Haidt, Bjorklund 2008) was put forward mostly based upon findings from moral psychology and cognitive sciences. This model of moral cognition maintains that moral judgments are best understood as a result of quick, spontaneous and intuitive evaluations based upon evolutionally developed emotional gut reactions, such as these are shaped by the social and cultural factors of the agent's social context. Within such an approach moral reasoning in these cases is seen merely as a *post hoc* confabulation following some explicit demand for the justification of the occurring judgment. The model thus opposes rationalism according to which moral judgments predominantly result from genuine moral reasoning starting with basic principles or with general moral assumptions and proceeding to concrete judgments about particular cases. Jonathan Haidt characterizes traditional rationalism in the following way:

"Everyday moral reasoners are sometimes said to be like scientists, who learn by forming and testing hypotheses, who build working models of the social world as they interact with it, and who consult these models when making moral judgments. A key feature of the scientist metaphor is that judgment is a kind of inference made in several steps. The reasoner searches for relevant evidence, weighs evidence, coordinates evidence with theories, and reaches a decision. Some of these steps may be performed unconsciously and any of the steps may be subject to biases and errors, but a key part of the definition of reasoning is that it has steps, at least a few of which are performed consciously. [...] [M]oral reasoning can now be defined as conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment. To say that moral reasoning

is a conscious process means that the process is intentional, effortful, and controllable and that the reasoner is aware that it is going on” (2001: 817–818).

Social intuitionism completely rejects such a picture of moral cognition.

As another alternative, occupying middle ground, chromatic rationalism takes moral judgment to be a judgmental act shaping as a result of the complete judgmental situation, in which general moral considerations (moral principles or reasons) do not exercise their effect in an explicit manner; they rather effectuate their influence from the rich morphological cognitive background. As such it is positioned between the social intuitionist model of moral judgment and between traditional moral rationalism that has been dominant within moral theory. Moral principles operate from a rich cognitive background and do not have to be explicitly present in the process of forming a moral judgment in order to be genuinely effective while shaping it. Introspective immediacy of some (or even most) of our moral judgments is not to be confused with the lack of justificatory ground for these judgments. In the reason giving process an agent retraces these connections and thereby provides justification for a particular judgment.

### **Moral judgment and phenomenology**

One can point out also phenomenological arguments (i.e. arguments relying on experiential aspects of morality) in relation to moral judgment. Traditional rationalism model of moral reasons is characterized by its commitment to conscious, explicit, reflective, step-wise moral reasoning based primarily on cognitive mechanism featuring our reliance to explicitly recognized and entertained reasons (Haidt 2001; Horgan, Timmons 2007). In light of phenomenology of reasons this is untenable, since we often experience our judgments and action as being based on reasons

or informed by reasons in a way that does not include explicit stepwise reasoning process, where a judgment or an action would be the conclusion. This leaves us with the contrast between social intuitionism and chromatic rationalism as two viable competing accounts. Understanding phenomenology to deal with the experiential aspects of consciousness (occurrent mental states) Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (forthcoming) argue that there are convincing phenomenological arguments revealing inability of social intuitionism to provide a viable accommodation of moral experience, in particular its aspects related to moral reasons and reason-responsiveness.

Let us now turn to the preferred example Horgan and Timmons (forthcoming) use to demonstrate their point and take it a step further. They compare moral judgment formation with the process of getting a joke (e.g. in the form of a newspaper cartoon or just a simple one-liner such as: “A dyslexic man walks into a bra [...]” or “There’s two fish in a tank, and one says ‘How do you drive this thing?’”. An apology for the bad jokes is in order here, but you can think of your own preferred example. The key point is that usually in joke-getting process an array of background information in mostly indirect way.). If we look at cases of joke getting we can ask what does it take to explain them, and also why and how do we find them being funny. There seems to be a lot of morphological background involved into the process (Potrc 1999; Horgan, Potrc 2011). We need to have access and appeal to a wide array of diversified information in order to get the joke. And this supposedly happens almost instantaneously and most certainly prior to getting the joke.

One can transpose the three models of the space of reasons to this example. Traditional rationalism model would claim that the joke-getting process in this case consisted of numerous inferential steps, explicitly represented background information and ending in the conclusion that the joke is funny along

with the appropriate required response. We obviously do not experience it in that way. Rather the process of joke-getting is experienced as spontaneous and almost immediate. On the other extreme social intuitionism model would explain the process of joke-getting experience as some sort of gut-level reaction producing generic effect of funniness, while only later one would confabulate about relevant features that would support this initial reaction, pointing out information relevant for the joke.

Chromatic rationalism model on the other hand occupies the space between these two extremes. The key point is that even if our responses (both in joke-getting case and in moral judgment) might be psychologically spontaneous and instantaneous they nonetheless are reason-responsive, despite that these reasons do not figure explicitly in any preceding reasoning (as traditional rationalism would require) but illuminate our judgments and actions from the rich background. In order to understand how chromatic rationalism works it is useful to take a look at the manner in which background information is stored in a cognitive system. It is not to be found there in an explicit or occurrent representational form, but rather in a dispositional manner, waiting in the weights (an expression borrowed from description of connectionist networks) of the system (Horgan, Tienson 1996). The content in question, everything that the system has in store dispositionally, may be called morphological content, the content whose form singles out the multi-dimensional cognitive landscape that it inhabits. Morphological content may become occurrent and explicit. As their holistic background though, it illuminates inferential processes, thereby providing a specific experiential quality to them. Chromatic rationalism thereby integrates phenomenology to reasoning, giving a different meaning to it in respect to the traditional rationalism. Morphological content provides relevant reasons which illuminate inferences.

Joke-getting and belief-formation are cases in point. Social intuitionism downplays this aspect of reason-responsiveness, stressing gut-reaction responses and post-hoc confabulation justification (Haidt 2001). The persuasive specific joke-getting contrast case requires taking into account a wide net of pertinent background information enabling our rapid variable response, with subsequent ability to reliably explicitly specify the relevant information figuring as its basis. Intuitionist picture of joke-getting experience as gut-level generic effects of funniness with the ensuing attempt to explain it by confabulating reasons lacks plausibility, and this goes as well for the traditional rationalism model.

From the point of view of phenomenology morphological or chromatic rationalism claims that in direct moral judgment “one experiences oneself as responding to what is in this specific circumstance these particular here and now reasons [...]. One’s experience of the circumstances calling for a certain response fit together with one’s intuitive judgment that one ought to help and one’s swinging into action” (Horgan, Timmons 2007: 290). And similarly the phenomenology of reason giving is such that “the practice of moral reason-giving is typically a matter of citing morally relevant considerations that one generally takes to be defeasibly sufficient for an action’s all-in moral status – considerations featured in moral principles” (Horgan, Timmons 2007: 291).

### **Moral cognition and reasons**

In respect to moral judgment, chromatic rationalism approach thus allows for effectivity of moral principles, reasons or other morally relevant considerations in a background manner. Principles and reasons inhabit a cognizer’s rich dynamical morphological landscape, illuminating the situation where moral judgment gets fallen. They thus do not need to be

explicitly represented in the situation, and yet they exercise their supportive effect upon the formed total cognitive state's representation. This allows for a phenomenologically realistic rendering of principles and reasons effectivity pertaining to moral judgment formation and explanation. The idea of chromatic illumination may be conveyed by a painting (e.g. imagine one of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec paintings of indoor scene being lighted by several sources of different lights) where the illumination sources, providing various shades and qualities of light are not themselves explicitly present in the depicted scene, all in being indirectly there through their illuminating effect, imposing a specific visual quality upon the painting (Horgan, Potrč 2011).

Morphological rationalism presupposes a constitutive role of moral reasons in the formation of moral judgment, and on their background morphological effectivity through which they chromatically illuminate the encountered situation. Morphological rationalism overcomes the main difficulties of both rationalism and social intuitionism. Rationalism woes come from its insistence upon reasons and reasoning explicit forthcoming requirement in judgment formation, which is now adapted by the background morphology setting. Social intuitionism rightly insists upon the intuitive instantaneous formation of moral judgments, yet does not accord any role to reasons or principles. This is now fixed by morphological rationalism. Morphological approach to human cognition is thus more realistic as compared to the explicit representations and reasoning supporting approaches or the ones that deny to principles and reasons any foundation providing role, such as is the case for social intuitionism concerning moral judgment.

This model allows for inclusion of phenomena like moral perception, intuition and imagination. Even in more recent defences of these phenomena like that of Audi (2004, 2013) the psychology of moral judgment seems to be mostly omitted from the discussion, but one

very important aspect that Audi mentions and that could serve as an entering point into the discussion is the difference between conclusions of inference and conclusions of reflection (Audi 2004: 45–48; cf. Audi 2013: 95–96). What characterizes the latter is that while the former are understood as conclusions based on propositions taken as evidence in the process of inferential reasoning, the latter are more like judgments based on the reflection concerning the object of our consideration as a whole, and not form one or more premises (Audi's examples: judgment about a poem, judging a recommendation letter as being strong). Such a characterization of conclusion of reflection seems very similar to morphological nature of moral judgment. Jonathan Dancy speaks about "judgment in general as a response to recognized reasons..." (2004: 114) but there is nothing in such an understanding of judgment that would require such a recognition to be explicit and figuring in inferential steps towards judgment. Audi stresses a similar point in regard to his defence of moral perception: "Our responses to persons and their deeds, like our responses to paintings and sonatas, may be very finely adjusted to myriad perceptible properties without our drawing a single inference" (Audi 2013: 54).

One of the basic characteristics of moral perceptions and moral intuition is that they are non-inferential, that is that from the psychological point of view they are not conclusion from preceding premises (but this does not mean that the content of such perceptions and intuitions is such that it cannot be derived from more general moral considerations) (Audi 2004: 33). That is why one must understand this thesis of non-inferentiality not only in epistemic, but also in psychological sense, as Audi also notices in relation to intuition: "an intuition must be inferential, in the sense that the intuited proposition in question is not – at the time it is intuitively held – believed on the basis of a premise" (Audi 2004: 33).

Based on that one can now see how such traditional intuitionism could also benefit from



the rejection of the assumption that morphological pluralism highlights and also rejects. This assumption can be formulated as “(A) Assumption. Unless conscious moral reasoning is part of the process leading to moral judgment, subjects’ reason-giving efforts are not a matter of citing considerations that really did play a causal role in the generation of the judgments in question; rather, reason-giving in these cases is a matter of confabulation” (Horgan, Timmons 2007: 282). If we reject A and accept morphological rationalism, then we pave the way for a suitable inclusion of moral perception in moral cognition.

### Moral perception and disagreement

In this section I would like to address the question of *moral disagreement*, but not in the standard framework, where the existence of disagreement is usually taken as part of a powerful argument against some sorts of objectivity in morals that the talk about moral perception or intuition might invite. On the contrary, it will be hinted at how one can use the notion of moral perception to get a better grasp or understanding of moral disagreement and in the subsequent section I will investigate consequences for moral dialogue.

Disagreement is not merely an argument against some sort of moral objectivity, but can be on the other hand a mark of genuine moral dialogue in search for the right answers or at least acceptable ones. The very phenomena of moral disagreements and our related practices, in which we try to get, not just to any, but to the right answer and to convince other to agree with us, presuppose that there is some basis that the dialogue is aiming at.

“[T]o the extent that we do engage in moral dialogue about questions of principle – as against moral manipulation, propaganda, bullying, well-poisoning, image-building, special pleading and so forth – our common pursuit is regulated by the idea that there is a

sound conclusion to be arrived at, a right answer at stake, one on which a sufficiently rational and uncurtailed dialogue would converge. The confidence that there is a right answer is precisely measured by the confidence that such a dialogue would find it. Our actual dialogue, curtailed and falling short of rationality, takes place under the ideal of rational convergence. That is what gives it its status as authentic dialogue” (Skorupski 1985–1986: 240).

By including moral perception as an important part of morality new difficulties emerge for the prospects of moral dialogue. Returning to Murdoch and her thesis that moral experience is best characterized in perceptual terms we can see that she also characterizes moral differences as differences in vision, namely that

“moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. In other words, a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of Gestalt. We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds” (Hepburn, Murdoch 1956: 40–41; cf. Kyte 1996).

Differences in moral perception are thus an important source of moral disagreement. Furthermore, these are hard to overcome using plain arguments, since they presuppose agreement on the criteria of application, which is on the other hand not guaranteed to exist. Carol Gilligan even poses a thesis that we can have two radically different overall perspectives, namely justice and care perspective and that “(b) in changing from one perspective (or reading) to another there is no transition, no discernible movement or passage, and thus no (obvious) way of placing the set of terms from one perspective in direct relation to those of another perspective” (Kyte 1996: 101; cf. Gilligan 1987). These considerations certainly contribute to a rather gloomy image of possibility of moral dialogue and moral progress. How to try to overcome it?

## Chromatic rationalism and moral dialogue

To conclude let us first synthesize key points from the first half of the paper. Morphological or chromatic rationalism is a view concerning moral judgment, in particular it is a combination of two main claims, one pertaining to the psychological aspects of moral judgment or moral cognition and the other to its normative aspects. Regarding psychological aspects it claims that moral judgment follows a dynamical model of reasons, according to which reasons are situated in an agent's structured morphological background, and from this background chromatically illuminate the judgment. In this way they play a part in judgment formation, even though not being explicitly represented or considered as a part of the process of moral reasoning. As such morphological or chromatic rationalism represents an intriguing base for an overall account of moral judgment, including its phenomenological, epistemic and other facets. Morphological or chromatic rationalism takes moral judgment to be a judgmental act shaping as a result of the complete judgmental situation, in which general moral considerations (moral principles or reasons) do not exercise their effect in an explicit manner; they rather effectuate their influence from the rich morphological cognitive background. That also explains why phenomenology often differentiates between the process of conscious reasoning and judgment. The latter can often come in the form of a moral perception. Moral considerations function from a rich cognitive background and do not have to be explicitly present in the procedure of forming a moral judgment in order to be genuinely effective while shaping it.

One lesson to learn from all that – especially in relation to moral disagreement and moral dialogue – is that if there is often no inferential path from one vision to the change to another, moral dialogue process

should involve also other strategies, which would appeal to changes in perception. One of the tasks of ethics is thus also to elaborate strategies that enable such transition. Such strategies must then be included in the models and practice of moral dialogue.

The role of moral dialogue is in forming our life ideals, regulating common living together, and resolution of conflicts. Theories of dialogue and argumentation help us to recognize, that moral dialogue is not a simple, one-dimensional phenomena or process, but that it consist of various justificatory and normative structures and burdens of proof (e.g. convincing, revealing, determining information, intending, negotiation, disputing, etc.) and different kinds of arguments (moral, political, pragmatic, strategic, etc.; cf. Testa 2012) and at the same time also going beyond mere argumentative or discursive sphere (e.g. point out moral visions of life). Seyla Benhabib avows that the “motivation for moral discourses arises when the certitudes of our life-worlds break down through conflict, dissent, and disagreement, when there is conflict as well as contention, misery as well as lack of solidarity” (Benhabib 2011: 72). A full and vivid awareness of the grave and pressing challenges that the world (ecological crisis, migration crisis, etc.) is facing today surely provides such motivation. It is therefore our task to create and employ other strategies for communicating moral perception and a more holistic moral vision (e.g. new concepts, metaphors, stories, etc.). One lesson learned from morphological rationalism as a model of moral cognition is that this is a hard, but not impossible task, since moral perceptions are reasons responsive. This is also part of the task Murdoch has in mind, when she states that “the task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark” (Hepburn, Murdoch 1956: 49). Moral dialogue, involving the mentioned strategies is a way out of this darkness.



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## MORALINIS SUVOKIMAS, PAŽINIMAS IR DIALOGAS

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Straipsnio tikslas – išanalizuoti moralinio suvokimo sampratą. Moralinis suvokimas nusakomas kaip savitas neinferentinis atsakas į konkrečias situacijas. Tam, kad moralinis suvokimas būtų susietas su tinkamu moralinio pažinimo modeliu, išplėtojama pozicija, apibūdinta morfologiniu racionalizmu. Moralinis sprendimas kyla iš dinamiško argumentų modelio, pasak kurio, argumentai, spalvingai nušviečiantys sprendimą, yra agento struktūruotas morfologinis fonas. Pagrindinis teiginys tas, kad toks modelis ypač tinkamas moraliniam suvokimui taikyti. Iš tokios perspektyvos paaiškinamos kai kurios praktinės implikacijos (nesutarimas, tarpkultūriniai dialogai).

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** pažinimas, dialogas, nesutarimas, moralinis sprendimas, moralinis suvokimas, morfologinis racionalizmas, pagrindimas.