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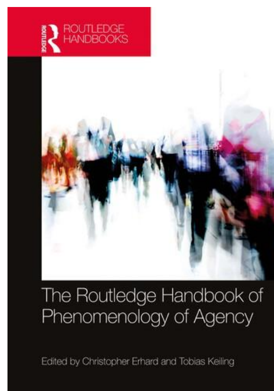

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MORAL EXPERIENCE

Its existence, describability, and significance

Uriah Kriegel

Introduction: three questions

In summarizing J.L. Mackie's (1977) argument for error theory, John McDowell writes:

> J.L. Mackie insists that ordinary evaluative thought presents itself as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world. And this phenomenological thesis seems correct. When one or another variety of philosophical non-cognitivism claims to capture the truth about what the experience of value is like, or (in a familiar surrogate for phenomenology) about what we mean by our evaluative language, the claim is never based on careful attention to the lived character of evaluative thought . . .
>
> *(McDowell 1985: 110)*

Jonathan Dancy sounds a similar note:

> [W]e take moral value to be part of the fabric of the world; taking our experience at face value, we judge it to be the experience of the moral properties of actions and agents in the world. And if we are to work with the presumption that the world is the way our experience represents it to us as being, we should take it in the absence of contrary considerations that actions and agents do have the sorts of moral properties we experience in them. This is an argument about the nature of moral experience, which moves from that nature to the probable nature of the world.
>
> *(Dancy 1986: 172)*

Further developing the phenomenological argument for moral cognitivism, Michael Smith writes:

> . . . we are to argue that our concept of value is the concept of a property that is there to be experienced. The argument for this is to be phenomenological. We are to argue that evaluative experience presents itself to us as the experience of properties genuinely

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> possessed by the objects that confront us. This phenomenological argument is to yield the conclusion that objects *seem* to have evaluative properties.
>
> (Smith 1993: 242)

My purpose here is not to evaluate the phenomenological arguments presented by Mackie, McDowell, Dancy, and Smith. My interest is rather in the very notion of phenomenological appeal in moral theory.

As the above quotations show, this kind of appeal has a venerable history in analytic moral philosophy. Yet it is only in the past decade or so that *moral phenomenology* has been explicitly treated (and pursued) as a self-standing area of research. To be sure, it has very much been "thematized" in the phenomenological tradition, but less so in analytic philosophy. As I will understand it here (without prejudging the usefulness of other potential understandings), moral phenomenology is the dedicated study of the experiential dimension of moral mental life, where "experiential" is understood in terms of phenomenal consciousness or what-it-is-like-ness (Horgan and Tienson 2005, 2008a; Kriegel 2008). The idea is that while moral philosophy in the analytic tradition has often appealed to certain aspects of our moral life, usually these have concerned the inferential role and representational content of moral mental states; the phenomenal character of moral mental states remains as yet unexplored. Moreover, phenomenological evidence may well bear on some central issues in metaethics and moral psychology, such as cognitivism and noncognitivism about moral judgment (Horgan and Timmons 2006; Kriegel 2012), sentimentalism and rationalism (Gill 2009; Horgan and Timmons 2017), error theory and the objectivistic purport of moral thought and discourse (Loeb 2007; Horgan and Timmons 2008b), and so on.

There are, however, three foundational challenges moral phenomenology must overcome before we can take it seriously. In this section, I present the gist of these challenges. In the following ones, I adduce considerations intended to address them.

The most basic challenge to moral phenomenology would be the claim that it has no subject matter. The claim can come in two grades. In its strong version, it would be that *there are no moral experiences*. In its weaker version, it would be that moral experiences *do not constitute a natural kind*: while there are many individual moral experiences, there is nothing unified about them. (Compare: when philosophers claim that "there is no such thing as emotion," or that "there are no concepts," they typically turn out to mean only this: there is no natural similarity, or homogeneity, among the various things designated by "emotion" or "concept.")[1]

Even if there is such a thing as (a unified) moral experience, it might be claimed that nothing informative could be said about it. After all, it is a common refrain in discussions of conscious experience that the phenomenal character of an experience, what it is like to have it, is *ineffable*. It is impossible to make a colorblind person appreciate the phenomenal character of seeing yellow. Such phenomenal character can be named or labeled, but it cannot be described, and therefore cannot be communicated; there is no *informative* account of it to be had. If so, it is unclear how moral phenomenology could contribute to our theory of moral mental life.

Even if it is granted that moral experience exists and is describable, it is unclear what significance it has within our overall moral life. In general, it is widely thought today that conscious experience is but the tip of the mental iceberg: most of what goes on in our mind, determining our behavior and capturing our personality and deepest commitments, goes on below the threshold of conscious experience. If so, understanding the moral dimension

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of our mental life requires in the first instance illumination of those more obscured parts, through the patient study of subpersonal cognitive processes, unconscious habits, and so on. Our phenomenological impressions of our moral mental life provide only the most superficial understanding.

Moral phenomenology faces a steep challenge, then. To convince us to pursue it, its proponents must provide satisfactory answers to the following three nested questions:

a Is there such a thing as moral experience?
b If there is such a thing as moral experience, can it be informatively described?
c If there is such a thing as moral experience, and it can be informatively described, is it important for an understanding of moral mental life?

Below, I address all three questions, recommending a positive answer to the first two and sketching a route to a positive answer to the third.

The question of existence: I. Moral experiences

Recall that the first, existential challenge to moral phenomenology came in two grades: a strong version claimed that there are no moral experiences, a weaker one that moral experiences do not form a natural kind. In this section, I address the stronger version; in the next, the weaker one.

The stronger claim could be undermined by citing moral mental states in which there is something it is like to be. Potential candidates include:

1 Judging that genocide is wrong.
2 Thinking that I ought to visit my great aunt in hospital.
3 Having the intuition that it is permissible to redirect the trolley.
4 Strongly desiring to meet one's professional duties in one's new job.
5 Making the decision to do right by someone.
6 Seeing that what the cat-torturing kids are doing is wrong.
7 Feeling indignant about US police killing another unarmed African-American.
8 Feeling guilty about not helping a blind person cross the street.
9 Feeling feeling deep respect for somebody.

The items on this list can be divided into four groups.

First, items 1–3 are cognitive, or intellectual, mental states. As such, many might argue that they have no phenomenal character, and thus do not qualify as experiences in the phenomenal sense. Others, however, will defend so-called cognitive phenomenology (Strawson 1994: ch. 1; Pitt 2004; Chudnoff 2015), and so consider 1–3 genuinely phenomenal.[2] Since their contents are clearly moral, involving as they do moral concepts (WRONG, OUGHT, PERMISSIBLE), they would then qualify as proper objects of moral phenomenology. Accordingly, some have developed a phenomenology of moral beliefs (Horgan and Timmons 2007) or of moral intuitions (Bedke 2008). At the same time, many still resist the notion of cognitive phenomenology (Robinson 2006; Carruthers and Veillet 2011), and would presumably reject a phenomenology of moral cognition.

Second, items 4 and 5 are "conative" or "motivational" states – states of the will whereby a subject exercises her agency. Traditionally, such states were thought to be best understood in terms of their distinctive functional role in guiding action. More recently, there has been an increasingly lively debate over the existence of a "phenomenology of agency" that outstrips

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the purely sensory experience of bodily exertion (Bayne 2008; Mylopoulous 2015; but see Ginet 1986 for an early discussion). As in the case of 1–3, there is no question that 4 and 5 are *moral* mental states; the main bone of the contention is whether they are *phenomenal* ones. (In the background is also a question about what it takes for a property to be phenomenal – a question I will set aside here, relying entirely on the reader's intuitive grip on the notion.[3])

In contrast, item 6 is a perceptual state, so its status as phenomenal is not in question. There are of course cases of unconscious perception (e.g., blindsight), but it is not in question that perception can also occur consciously. Moreover, its content is clearly moral. Traditionally, however, philosophers have been skeptical of the *existence* of such states as 6, typically on the grounds that moral properties are not sensible: "There is no such thing as a sensation having as its object a quality called moral goodness" (Brentano 1876: 74; see also McBrayer 2010). Presumably, the idea is that strictly speaking what we perceive is just the (nonmoral) supervenience base of moral properties; the moral properties themselves are represented only post-perceptually. For example, although we may describe ourselves as seeing the kindness or generosity shown by one person to another, what is strictly sensible in the exchange are certain "natural," nonmoral properties of the persons' behavior, which properties "subvene" kindness or generosity. In recent philosophy, there have been several spirited defenses of genuine moral perception (Harman 1977: ch. 1; Cuneo 2003; McGrath 2004; Audi 2013). Still, this area is too contentious to provide an instance of unquestionably-moral experiences. The dialectical situation here is the opposite of that attending items 1–5: there is no question whether perceptual states can be phenomenal, but there is a question whether they can be moral (whereas with cognitive and conative states there is no question that they can be moral, and the only question is whether they can be phenomenal).

From this dialectical perspective, moral emotions – items such as 7–9 – represent the most promising candidate moral experiences. It is widely accepted, both traditionally and in contemporary philosophy of mind, that emotional states can be felt and have a subjective quality, but also that they are often moral. Distinctly moral emotions such as guilt, shame, repentance, indignation, contempt, outrage, resentment, respect, pride, compassion, sympathy, and gratitude are routinely felt and thus occur consciously. This is not yet to say that the phenomenal character of these emotions captures their essence or deep nature; merely that such a phenomenal character *exists*, and thus constitutes *moral phenomenality*.

It thus seems highly plausible that there *exist* moral experiences, if only in the form of felt moral emotions, of the sort we are familiar with from first-person acquaintance. In addition, however, there might be moral-perceptual experiences, conscious occurrent moral judgments and intuitions, or experienced moral desires and decisions.

It remains that such moral experiences may have nothing in common in virtue of which they *are* moral experiences. That is, they may not constitute a natural kind. Certainly, this might be the case if some moral experiences are emotional while others are perceptual, cognitive, and/or conative. But even if all moral experiences are emotional experiences, say, it has sometimes been argued that emotions themselves do not form a natural kind (Griffiths 1997); if so, the moral emotions may not either.[4] Let us consider this concern next.

The question of existence: II. A phenomenal signature of morality?

Suppose a consensus emerges at some point on the full list of moral experience types. Three phenomenological questions would arise immediately. First:

- Is there a phenomenal property φ, such that *all* moral experiences exhibit φ?

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Such a property would represent a *phenomenal commonality* of moral experiences: something they all share qua moral experiences. A second, complementary question is:

- Is there a phenomenal property Ψ, such that *only* moral experiences exhibit Ψ?

This would be a *phenomenal peculiarity* of moral experiences – something distinctive of moral experiences that sets them apart from all other mental states. A third question is:

- Might φ = Ψ?

That is: might there be a phenomenal property which is *both* common *and* peculiar to moral experiences, a property that *all and only* moral experiences exhibit? If there is such a phenomenal property, then for any mental state M, if M exhibits this property, then M is a moral experience, and if M does not exhibit this property, then M is not a moral experience. We may call such a putative property the "phenomenal signature" of morality (or of moral experience).[5]

If there is a phenomenal signature of morality, then moral experiences constitute a natural kind after all – a kind all of whose members share a "natural" or objective similarity.[6]

Is there a reason to believe in a phenomenal signature of morality? Persuasive arguments to the contrary have certainly been presented (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008), though capable responses have been offered as well (Glasgow 2013). What I want to argue here is that the question of signature is less crucial to moral phenomenology than might be thought.

To see why, consider the fundamental issue surrounding any controversial type of phenomenality. So far, we have treated the fundamental issue as a simple existential question: does the relevant phenomenality exist or not? In reality, however, the question is subtler, inviting a choice between *three* possible positions. Consider the aforementioned debate over cognitive phenomenology. The debate pits against each other not only (i) proponents of a sui generis cognitive phenomenality characteristic of an experience of thinking and (ii) opponents who claim that there is nothing it is like to think; in addition, there is an intermediate position which (iii) recognizes that there is something it is like to think but attempts to account for it in terms of (a combination of) already familiar forms of sensory phenomenality (typically: the experience of silent-speech imagery). Position (i) is a form of *nonreductivism* or *primitivism* about cognitive phenomenality, Position (ii) is a kind of *eliminativism* or *irrealism* about it, while Position (iii) is a sort of *reductivist realism*. The choice can be appreciated by considering the following inconsistent triad of antecedently attractive propositions:

1. There is something it is like to engage in conscious cognitive activity (e.g., to think).
2. The phenomenal character of conscious cognitive activity (what it is like to think) is irreducible to the phenomenal character of sensory experiences.
3. The phenomenal character of sensory experiences exhausts all phenomenal character.

To reject (1) in this triad is to embrace what we may call cognitive-phenomenal eliminativism, to reject (2) is to embrace (what we may call) cognitive-phenomenal reductivism, and to reject (3) is to embrace cognitive-phenomenal primitivism.

Note, now, that the same three options present themselves in moral phenomenology – *regardless of whether there is a phenomenal signature of morality.* Consider the following triad:

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1 There is something it is like to undergo moral experience.
2 The phenomenal character of moral experience (what it is like to undergo one) is irreducible to the phenomenal character of sensory, cognitive, and motivational experiences.
3 The phenomenal character of sensory, cognitive, and motivational states exhausts all phenomenal character.

Now, in an ambitious cast of mind, we might interpret this triad as concerning a phenomenal signature of morality. It would then amount really to this:

1 There is a phenomenal signature of moral experience.
2 The phenomenal signature of moral experience (what it is like to have any moral experience) is irreducible to sensory, cognitive, and motivational phenomenal characters.
3 Sensory, cognitive, and motivational phenomenal characters exhaust all phenomenality.

However, even if there is no phenomenal signature of morality, one can intelligibly pose the question of elimination, reduction, or primitivism for *individual types of putative moral experience*. For example, while an eliminativist might deny that there is anything it is like to experience indignation, and a primitivist might hold that indignation has a sui generis phenomenal character, various reductivists might attempt to reduce the phenomenal character of indignation to a certain combination of negative visceral sensations, conscious thoughts about an injustice, and felt motivation to rectify that injustice. Likewise, we can readily formulate a similar triad for the experience of what Darwall (1977) called "recognition-respect," the kind of respect we might feel toward someone not because of her talents and accomplishments, but just because she is a human being:

1 There is something it is like to feel respect_r for a person.
2 The phenomenal character of respecting_r (what it is like to feel respect_r) is irreducible to (any combinations of) sensory, cognitive, and motivational phenomenal characters.[7]
3 Sensory, cognitive, and motivational phenomenal characters exhaust all phenomenal character.

An eliminativist about the phenomenality of recognition-respect would deny (1), a reductivist would deny (2), while a respect_r primitivist would deny (3).

The point is that one can debate the correct choice between primitivism, reductivism, and eliminativism about respect_r, indignation, guilt, or any other moral experience without first taking a stand on whether there exists a phenomenal signature of morality. Thus, the existence of such a signature is not a precondition for engaging in moral phenomenology. In a way, the issue of phenomenal signature is an issue lying *within* moral phenomenology, rather than an issue for the very legitimacy or viability of moral phenomenology. I conclude that the existence of a phenomenal signature, which would ratify the status of moral experiences as a natural kind, is immaterial to the viability of moral phenomenology.

The question of characterization: I. Theoretical roles

What approach is most suitable for the phenomenological characterization of some moral experience depends on what view one takes of that experience's phenomenal character. If one is an eliminativist about it, then obviously, one takes it that there is no phenomenality in need

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of characterization. If one is a reductivist, however, a very natural approach to phenomenological characterization presents itself: simply list all phenomenal elements the combination or compresence of which constitutes the relevant moral experience's phenomenal character. Suppose one holds, for example, that the phenomenal character of indignation reduces to the following collection of sensory, cognitive, and motivational components: (i) a sensation of "boiling blood" and flapping nostrils, (ii) the judgment that an injustice has been committed, and (iii) a felt pull to "do something about it." Then by comprehensively listing those elements, one would be effectively characterizing what it is like to feel indignation.

A more delicate question arises within the nonreductivist or primitivist framework. If the phenomenal character of recognition-respect, say, is simple and unanalyzable, how could we offer a substantive and informative description of it? It is for such primitive phenomenal properties, after all, that the claims of ineffability and incommunicability are most plausible. The problem is not special to *moral* phenomenology – any phenomenological inquiry faces it. But it concerns us specially because of the hope that moral phenomenology will somehow *inform* moral theory.

There are two general approaches to the problem. The first attempts to characterize primitives in some area of inquiry by their *theoretical role* within the dominant theory in the area. Consider an analogy from mathematics. The notions appearing in the theorems of a given axiomatization of Euclidean Geometry are defined in terms of notions appearing in the system's axioms.[8] But the notions appearing in the axioms are understood in terms of their role within these axioms (Hilbert 1900).[9] We can think of the axioms as describing a web of interrelations among nodes, with each node designated by a different primitive notion. While the meaning of theorems' notions is captured by definitions in terms of axioms' notions, the meaning of the latter is exhausted by the interrelations specified in the axioms.

A technique for regimenting these theoretical roles is the Ramsey sentence (Lewis 1966, 1972). A simple Ramsey sentence for a concept C in a theory T is produced by (i) collecting all of T's C-employing assertions, (ii) making a long conjunction of these, (iii) replacing occurrences of "C" and cognates with a variable, and (iv) prefacing the conjunction with an existential quantifier. This approach can be applied to a phenomenological theory mentioning the experience of recognition-respect, say, just as much as to a geometric theory employing the notion of a point. The following seem to be phenomenological observations about recognition-respect as we experience it pre-theoretically, culled (essentially verbatim) from the *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on respect (Dillon 2014):

- Respect is a particular mode of apprehending the object: the person who respects something pays attention to it and perceives it differently.
- Respect often means trying to see the object clearly, as it really is in its own right, and not seeing it solely through the filter of one's own desires and fears or likes and dislikes.
- Respect is object-generated rather than wholly subject-generated, something that is owed to, called for, deserved, elicited, or claimed by the object.
- Respect is also an expression of agency: it is deliberate, a matter of directed rather than grabbed attention, of reflective consideration and judgment.
- Respect involves "a deontic experience" – the experience that one *must* pay attention and respond appropriately.
- We respect something not because we want to but because we recognize that we have to respect it.
- Respect is the recognition of something "as directly determining our will without reference to what is wanted by our inclinations" (Rawls 2000: 153).

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- Respect is thus reason-governed: we cannot respect a particular object for just any old reason or for no reason at all.
- Respect is universalizing, in the sense that if F is a respect-warranting feature of object O, then respecting O on account of F commits us, other things equal, to respecting other things that also have feature F.

We may add further texture to our notion of respect_r experience by consulting some of Kant's pertinent observations:

- "Respect is properly the representation of worth that infringes upon my self-love" (Kant 1785/1997: 14).
- ". . . a human being regarded as a person, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price [and] exacts respect for himself from all other rational beings in the world. . ." (Kant 1797/1996: 186–187).
- "Respect for the [moral] law, which in its subjective aspect is called moral feeling, is identical with consciousness of one's duty" (Kant 1797/1996: 210).

A comprehensive phenomenological theory of the experience of respect_r would involve a great many observations of this sort, which could then be "Ramsified" to capture the theoretical role of respect_r experience in the theory. This would take the form:

> There is an *x*, such that *x* is a particular mode of apprehending the object & the person who *x*s something pays attention to it and perceives it differently & *x* often means trying to see the object clearly, as it really is in its own right & *x* is object-generated rather than wholly subject-generated & *x* is something that is owed to, called for, deserved, elicited, or claimed by the object & . . .

In this way we can provide an informative account of moral experiences' phenomenal character, even when the latter is primitive and irreducible. We do so by specifying the primitives' theoretical role as precisely as possible – just as the mathematician does with her own primitives.

Various technical issues arise here. First, phenomenological theory is bound to be much less accurate than mathematical theory, with falsehoods sure to creep into our theory of respect_r experience; any such error would appear to entail the falsity of the corresponding Ramsey sentence. Fortunately, Lewis (1972: 256) raises this problem and solves it in half a sentence: instead of forming a long conjunction of *all* observations about respect_r experience, we may form an even longer *disjunction* of conjunctions of *most* of these observations. With this device in place, the truth of this kind of more flexible Ramsey sentence is guaranteed if a sufficiently large portion of our phenomenological theory is true (see also Jackson 1998: 35). Second, in contrast to mathematics, disagreements plague phenomenological theory, and are specially stubborn – consensus in this area is elusive (Schwitzgebel 2008). This includes the domain of moral phenomenology, where it is impossible to rule out that people's underlying moral experiences simply differ in phenomenal character (Gill 2008). This problem can be set aside, however, by simply quarantining specific areas of disagreement (Bayne and Spener 2010). In practice, this would mean leaving out of our Ramsey sentence overly contentious phenomenological claims – or at least including those in far fewer disjuncts of the more flexible Ramsey sentence just described. Third, and perhaps underlying the previous two

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problems, there seems to be no accepted methodological organon we could use in phenomenological theory-construction. Here I think the proponent of moral phenomenology would be wise to concede that moral phenomenology cannot aspire to the levels of precision, rigor, and consensus that mathematics, and for that matter mainstream analytic philosophy, do. Brutally put, moral phenomenology is an enterprise of *the humanities*, with their disappointingly approximative and often qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) methods. All the same, if those methods have the potential to deepen our understanding of reality, including moral reality, there is no reason to pretend they are not available to us.[10]

The question of characterization: II. Contrastive introspective revelation

This, then, is the first approach to the characterization of phenomenal primitives: specifying their theoretical role within the relevant phenomenological theory. The second approach is what we might call *contrastive introspective revelation*. Let me explain this approach in three steps. According to the *revelation theory* of color, we do not come to understand the nature of colors by appreciating the right philosophical (or other) theory (Johnston 1992). For example, we cannot grasp the nature of blue by digesting an objectivist theory in terms of reflection and refraction properties, a dispositionalist theory in terms of the tendency to elicit bluish experiences, or any other theory. Rather, we grasp the nature of blue by looking at the sky on a clear day with a properly functioning visual system. When we look at a paradigmatic color in the right conditions, and everything goes well, we are acquainted with the nature of that color. The basic idea in the background – profound for philosophers but peradventure obvious otherwise – is that the intellect ("reason") is not the only faculty through which we may grasp the deep nature of a property. Sometimes the eyes can disclose the nature of a property better – to provide *insight* into it in the original sense of the term. And other faculties may do so in other cases.

This basic idea applies rather naturally to phenomenal properties. Perhaps the intellect is best positioned to disclose the nature of phenomenal properties that arise from combinations of more basic ones. But when it comes to the most basic, elemental phenomenal properties, it is rather *direct introspective encounter* that best positions us to grasp the nature of the property. We come to appreciate the nature of the property of *being bluish* (I use "bluish" technically to refer to the phenomenal property that corresponds to blue), for example, when we introspect a paradigmatically bluish experience and everything goes well. In general, sui generis phenomenal primitives appear to lend themselves most straightforwardly to grasping through introspection.

When a phenomenal primitive is introspectively salient, as tends to be the case with bluishness and pain, it is fairly clear how an "introspective revelation" theory works. But asked to directly introspect the nature of a putatively sui generis phenomenal character of respect$_r$, say, most of us are likely to feel stumped: it is not clear "where to look" and "what to do." For such relatively nuanced and elusive phenomenal properties, it appears crucial that we contemplate a variety of *phenomenal contrasts* that foreground the specific phenomenal primitive we are interested in and put it in sharper relief. Thus, there are several types of experience that have something in common with, but also something crucially different from, indignation: notably anger and frustration, but also hurt, sorrow, and even surprise (indignation is typically elicited by something that in some sense we do not expect). To appreciate the nature of the phenomenal character of indignation, we must contemplate, side by side as it were, a paradigmatic experience of indignation and a paradigmatic experience

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of anger, a paradigmatic experience of indignation and a paradigmatic experience of frustration, and so on. Through triangulation from a sufficiently rich set of contrasts, an ever clearer and more acute introspective insight into the distinctive phenomenal character of indignation should arise. It is the moral phenomenologist's task to provide the kinds of contrast that would bring out subtle moral-phenomenal features. It is worth distinguishing here between a *dialectical* use of phenomenological contrasts, which serves to *argue* for the existence of some phenomenal features (see Siegel 2007), and a merely *ostensive* use, which serves only to focus the mind on these features (Koksvik 2011). My claim is that moral phenomenology can, at the very least, avail itself of phenomenological contrasts in their ostensive capacity. The goal is to focus the mind on any phenomenal primitives moral experience might involve. The exercise is still a theoretical exercise, insofar as we cannot appreciate such contrasts very well when in the clutches of indignation, say. We must do so rather by contemplating remembered or imagined experience pairs (see, e.g., Horgan and Timmons 2017 for a phenomenological contrast between indignation and frustration). We must then hold in our mind, so to speak, all the relevant contrasts at once, and come to "see" (read: *grasp*) that distinctive quality of indignation experience.

The claim that we *can* do so, at least in some cases, is the core thesis of the contrastive introspective revelation approach to the appreciation of phenomenal primitives. Ultimately, the hope is that between (i) the cases lending themselves to such contrastive introspective revelation and (ii) cases in which a sufficiently articulated phenomenological theory allows us to specify a reasonably textured theoretical role, all phenomenal primitives will be "covered."

Each of these two approaches has its own advantages and disadvantages. Contrastive introspective revelation is in some sense more fundamental, as it acquaints us directly with our subject matter. Indeed, one suspects that the theoretical role approach is at least partially parasitic on it, insofar as the development of phenomenological theory relies in part on introspective encounter and contrast. Characterization by theoretical role also raises the specter of permutability problems of the sort discussed in the literatures on structuralism in the philosophy of science (Demopoulos and Friedman 1985) and on global descriptivism in the philosophy of language (Lewis 1984): the worry that two properties with distinct intrinsic natures may have perfectly symmetric theoretical roles within a theory, allowing for permutation of intrinsic natures without perturbation of theoretical roles (see Newman 1928). The distinctness of their intrinsic natures would then be detectable only in direct introspective grasp. To that extent, contrastive introspective revelation must be the ultimate foundation of moral phenomenology, providing the phenomenologist with original insight into the nature of phenomenal primitives. However, insofar as moral phenomenology is supposed to be a potentially fecund research area, pursued by a community of inquiry, and not just a private exercise, it would also be useful to have accounts of its subject matter statable in public language. The characterization of phenomenal primitives in terms of theoretical role allows for this and is in that respect superior to sheer revelation.

The question of significance: moral experience and moral life

As noted in the introduction, it is widely accepted today that conscious processes form the tip of the mental iceberg, and that most mental life – including our deepest behavioral dispositions and the habits most intimately tied to our personality – takes place below the surface of conscious experience. But unconscious processes are not *only* a crushing majority of mental processes. They are also developmentally and evolutionarily prior to conscious processes. The latter are thus largely derivative phenomena, albeit ones particularly striking from the

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first-person perspective. Ontogenetically and phylogenetically, they are Johnny-come-latelys rather than foundational phenomena. If so, their study would seem to be of relatively secondary importance for a deep understanding of our moral mental life.

This problem is not special to *moral* phenomenology, of course; it affects all phenomenology equally. This is not the place to *argue* for a place for phenomenological inquiry in our attempts at a full understanding of our mental life. Instead, I am going to merely *describe* the kind of position which, I believe, is the phenomenologist's best approach to responding to the challenge. As we will see, the issues raised by this approach are far too complex to be handled satisfactorily here; this section should therefore be seen as an exercise in presenting a strategy that needs to be pursued seriously elsewhere. My goal here is thus not to neutralize the challenge, but to describe the response to it that I would recommend to the moral phenomenologist. The general shape of the response is this: while various orders of *causal priority* flow from unconscious to conscious processes, there is an order of *conceptual priority* that proceeds in the opposite direction. Below I describe three instances of this general strategy in contemporary philosophy of mind.

Goldman (1993) argues that our ascriptions of mental states to others on the basis of their behavior are parasitic on prior introspective ascription of conscious states of the same type to oneself. For example, we ascribe sadness to a friend on the basis of the friend's behavior, but only against the background of (i) grasping the nature of sadness on the basis of introspective encounter with our own sadness experiences and (ii) awareness of the kinds of behavior we typically engage in when experiencing sadness. This seems to ground our mastery of mental concepts in introspective acquaintance with conscious states falling in these concepts' extensions.

In a similar vein, Searle (1990, 1992: ch. 7) has argued for a "connection principle" between unconscious and conscious intentional states: an unconscious state is intentional only if it is *potentially conscious*. Thus, an unconscious wish that *p* is the intentional state it is, and an intentional state at all, only because it is disposed to become a conscious wish that *p*. For Searle, an unconscious mental state that cannot in principle become conscious is impossible. Although Searle himself does not say so, one might suspect that this condition is built into the very concept of an unconscious mental state.

Another view in the same ballpark casts the concept of the mental as a prototype concept, and then claims that all the relevant prototypes are conscious experiences (Horgan and Kriegel 2008; Kriegel 2015: ch. 4). An example of a prototype concept familiar from cognitive psychology is the concept of furniture: for something to qualify as a piece of furniture, it must resemble sufficiently (and relevantly) prototypical pieces of furniture; and the prototypical pieces of furniture are, it appears, tables and chairs (Rosch 1975). The hypothesis under consideration is that, likewise, for something to qualify as a mental state it must resemble sufficiently (and relevantly) prototypical mental states – and that the prototypes here are certain conscious experiences (presumably, the most phenomenally striking ones).

In all these accounts, the status of an unconscious mental state as mental depends on its relation to some conscious mental state(s). Whether the relation is one of parasitic-ascribability, potential-becoming, or (relevant) similarity, the core claim is that our grip on unconscious mentality is somehow dependent upon a prior grip on conscious mentality. Assuming that mental states are realized in brain states, but that not all brain states realize mental states (some states of the brain have no mentalistic significance), we might ask what the difference is between the brain states that do realize mental states and those that do not. The above approaches answer in unison: a brain state realizes a mental state when it either (a) realizes

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a conscious experience, that is, supports the instantiation of phenomenal properties, or (b) realizes a state that bears the right relation to conscious experiences.

It is in this sense that conceptual priority may flow from conscious to unconscious mentality even if unconscious mentality clearly enjoys developmental and evolutionary priority. Paul Ricœur (1950: 22) made the same point in his inquiry into the phenomenology of the will: causal processes underlying the operation of the will always proceed from the bottom up, that is, from subpersonal micro-processes to conscious macro-processes; but understanding of their nature tends to proceed from the top down, illuminating those subpersonal micro-processes in terms of their role in underwriting the conscious macro-processes of which we have immediate first-person insight. A parallel point can be made about *moral* mental life. Surely the causal processes subserving the experience of indignation are subpersonal and unconscious, and perhaps creatures can enter unconscious indignation states at various stages of ontogenetic and phylogenic development at which they are as yet unable to *experience* indignation. It remains that we naturally understand and classify those unconscious states as indignation, rather than as anger or as frustration, because of what it *would* be like to experience them if one underwent them consciously.

In the background may be two different kinds of *curiosity*, motivating two different forms of understanding. Of any phenomenon, we may ask "How did it come to be?" but we may also ask "What is it?" The former question courts a causal answer, which tends to proceed from the bottom up, from micro to macro, from part to whole, from process onset to process product. But the second question is completely independent and can easily proceed in the opposite directions. The point is that an answer to the "How did it come to be?" question does not automatically deliver an answer to the "What is it?" question. Granted, *sometimes* the best answer to "What is it?" is "It is the kind of thing that results from this kind of causal process." That is, some phenomena owe their identity conditions to their causal origins. But surely many phenomena do not. Thus, when we ask of a *mental* phenomenon "What is it?" an antecedently promising answer is "It is the kind of thing whose phenomenal character is such-and-such when it occurs consciously." Even if most indignation phenomena are unconscious and subpersonal, for example, arguably our pretheoretic, original grip on *what they are* relies on this kind of answer, that is, on our first-person insight into what it is like to experience indignation consciously.

Sensitive to this distinction, Brentano (1890/1) distinguished between *genetic* and *descriptive* psychology. The former provides causal explanation of the genesis of mental phenomena; the latter merely describes the phenomena. (That is, the former answers questions of the form "How did it come to be?," the latter questions of the form "What is it?") Just by drawing this distinction, we can appreciate the manner in which descriptive psychology is prior in the order of understanding to genetic (or "explanatory") psychology: in an "ideal reconstruction" of science, we would presumably proceed first by describing the phenomena in need of explanation and only then offer an explanation of them.[11] Without knowing what "it" *is*, it is hard to see how we might be able to explain how "it" came to be. And I have suggested that, in the psychological domain (including in moral psychology), the answer to the "What is it?" question often takes the form "It is the kind of thing that has such-and-such phenomenal character when it occurs consciously." If so, the very description of the phenomena moral psychology is expected to explain presupposes moral phenomenology.

It is worth noting, in this context, that the difference between descriptive and explanatory psychology seems to mirror that between philosophical and scientific understanding: where science answers, in the first instance, causal-explanatory questions of the form "How

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did it come to be?," philosophy tends to focus primarily on questions of essence and identity, questions which often take the form "What (kind of thing) is it?" To that extent, we can see that moral phenomenology's organizing question places it squarely within the project of moral philosophy.

To repeat, this section was only an exercise in describing an approach the phenomenologist might pursue in addressing the challenge of significance. I have not *argued* for this approach, because the issues it raises are far too vast to admit of serious treatment in the present context.

Conclusion

If we want to understand the moral realm, it would be an intellectual missed opportunity to simply ignore our first-person insight into our moral experience. I have belabored the feasibility and relevance of a phenomenology of moral experience mostly because the notion is so foreign to analytic moral philosophy. But it is worth noting that notions in the vicinity are virtually taken for granted in core central-European traditions in moral philosophy (see Brentano 1889; Meinong 1894; Ehrenfels 1897; Scheler 1913; Mandelbaum 1955 *inter alia*). When reading this material, even with an analytic eye, it is striking just how rich and sophisticated the pursued inquiry into moral reality is. I have argued here that there are no foundational reasons to be skeptical about this kind of inquiry. First of all, it is clear that moral phenomenology *has a subject matter*: there clearly exist moral experiences, whether or not they share a phenomenal signature of morality. Second, what it is like to undergo a moral experience is describable in a theoretically useful manner, and certainly directly graspable (with the aid of the right contrasts), even when primitive and irreducible. Finally, a descriptive rather than explanatory emphasis in moral-psychological inquiry casts moral phenomenology as potentially centrally relevant to moral theory.[12]

Related topics

See Chapters 19 (Horgan and Nida-Rümelin) and 23 (Strawson).

Notes

1 I will discuss this kind of view of emotions in the second section. For the case of concepts, see Machery (2009).

2 Strawson (1994), for example, argues that there is a phenomenal difference between listening to the news in French as someone who understands French and listening to them as someone who does not understand French. The difference, he claims, is in what he calls "understanding-experience": the experience of grasping the propositional content conveyed by the relevant sounds.

3 In the literature, a certain movement may be discerned toward explicating phenomenality in terms of the characteristic intellectual puzzlement raised by the phenomenon of consciousness: phenomenality is that which is susceptible to an explanatory gap, or to zombie scenario, or the knowledge-argument reasoning, or the like (see Bayne 2009; Carruthers and Veillet 2011; Horgan 2011; Kriegel 2015: ch. 1).

4 In addition, it might be claimed, post-Freud, that deep understanding of the very nature of emotions is not gained by attending to their conscious manifestations, but on the contrary by studying the behavioral manifestations of the unconscious dispositions they embody. This is to raise again the worry captured in question (c) in the first section. This question will be discussed toward the end of the paper.

5 We can also speak of an "approximate phenomenal signature" or a "phenomenal near-signature" in case there is a phenomenal property that *most* moral experiences exhibit and *almost* all of them do.

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6 The notion of naturalness I have in mind here is that devised by Lewis (1983) and further developed by Sider (2011). Lewis suggests that universals differ in their degree of naturalness: the more objectively similar its instances, the more "natural" the universal. Sider extends the notion to the referents of expressions other than predicates, including the existential quantifier.

7 We should not include emotional phenomenology in the list of potential reducers, because respect is intended here as itself a *species* of emotion.

8 I use the term "notion" as conveniently ambiguous between terms and concepts (somewhat as "statement" is often used as conveniently ambiguous between sentence and proposition).

9 This is, in reality, only a first approximation of the true story. More accurately, *some* notions appearing in a mathematical system's axioms may be defined in terms of others, as a central research program in geometry in the final quarter of the 19th century showed: Pasch (1882) managed to define all geometric notions in terms of four fundamental ones (point, segment, plane, superposition), Peano (1889) then reduced the number to three (point, segment, motion), before Pieri (1900) brought the count down to two (point, motion). Obviously, however, there was never any hope of doing away with *all* primitive, undefined notions. There must be *some* such notions in terms of which the others can be defined. And yet, these undefined notions must be understood somehow. The way these are understood by mathematicians is simply in terms of their conceptual role within the axiomatic system.

10 In the offing are some truly profound questions about the relationship between, science, the humanities, knowledge, and understanding that we cannot take up here.

11 It is noteworthy, in this context, that particle physicists, too, distinguish between the task of recording the way a particle behaves under various experimental conditions and the task of offering an explanatory model of this behavior; interestingly, physicists refer to the former endeavor as "phenomenology." Thus, the most recent particle to be discovered, the Higgs boson, was discovered in 2012. But a "phenomenological" characterization of the phenomena warranting positing it predated the discovery significantly (see, e.g., Ellis et al. 1976). The point is that distinguishing description from explanation cannot be cast as a naïve notion of the humanities; it is essential to the conduct of inquiry in the most rigorous sectors of basic science.

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