

Feeling and Moral Perception

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the role of feeling in a realist account of moral judgment. I argue that feeling is the subjective mode of our perception of moral values and constitutes a part of the basis of our capacity for making moral judgments. I begin in §1 by drawing from some insights and problems in Stoicism, and arguing that feeling can help us find our way through the world, and so tells us something about reality and how to react. In §2 I review some of McDowell's comments about the analogy between values and secondary qualities, and briefly discuss the relation between feeling and moral sensibility. In §3, I consider cases of perceptual unresponsiveness and error and draw analogies between these cases and forms of moral insensitivity. I end in §4 with a brief discussion of moral disagreement and the problems disagreement poses for claims that there is a *right* way to see (or feel in) particular situations or a moral reality to be seen (or felt) at all.

Hume claimed that “morality...is more properly felt than judged of.”¹ This idea generally inspires non-cognitivist or projectivist views about moral judgment – views which hold that the moral content of a judgment is constituted by our feelings, that morality originates in the passions rather than existing in the external world. But if feeling is regarded as a kind of perception, then the idea that feeling rather than reason plays the central role in morality is also compatible with a realist account of moral judgment. In this paper, I will outline an account of feeling as a perceptual capacity. Our ability to feel in response to the world – and to make sense of these feelings – constitutes a part of the “distinctive way of seeing situations” which John

¹ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.1.2, 470.

McDowell argues is the basis of our capacity for making moral judgments.² On this view, our feelings can latch onto real features of the world which may constitute moral values. I begin in §1 by drawing from some insights and problems in Stoicism, and arguing that feeling can help us find our way through the world, and so tells us something about reality and how to react. In §2 I review some of McDowell's comments about the analogy between values and secondary qualities, and briefly discuss the relation between feeling and moral sensibility. In §3, I consider cases of perceptual unresponsiveness and error and draw analogies between these cases and forms of moral blindness. I end in §4 with a brief discussion of moral disagreement and the problems disagreement poses for claims that there is a *right* way to see (or feel in) particular situations or a moral reality to be seen (or felt) at all.

1. "This is a pot."

On Epictetus' view of life, freedom is gained by worrying only about those things that are "up to us."³ This involves mastering control over "perception, intention, desire, aversion," and the like. Stoic freedom is thus achieved in part by divesting our perceptions of personal bias which might potentially distort our evaluation of things. Epictetus reminds us:

As for every thing that delights your mind or is useful or beloved, remember to describe it as it really is, starting with the smallest thing. If you are fond of a pot, say, "It is a pot that I am fond of." For then, if it breaks, you will not be upset. If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being. Then if they die you will not be upset.⁴

Our way of looking at things can be influenced by our preferences, cares, concerns, attachments, and biases. Epictetus warns that these influences can be distorting by leading us to see things otherwise than as they objectively are. But Epictetus' conclusion, that if we have called things by

² "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge: Harvard UP (1998), 88.

³ Matson, Wallace I., *Epictetus: Encheiridion* in Louis P. Pojman, ed. *Classics of Philosophy: Volume 1, Ancient and Medieval*. New York: Oxford University Press (1998).

⁴ Epictetus, §3.

their proper names, then if the vase breaks or the child dies, then we will not be upset, does not follow. Although it is true that we can get carried away with our attachments to particular things, persons, or goals, Epictetus went wrong to the extent that he was suggesting that strong feelings or reactions are never warranted. If by “you will not be upset,” he means only that one will not let one’s feelings dictate action without any reflection or self-control, then we need not accuse Epictetus of dismissing the value of things other than peace of mind. He is only reminding us that it’s good to be able to take a reflective step back from our passionate selves. But if he means that one will not even *feel* upset once one has called the vase or the child by its name, then his advice seems not only implausible as a description of human behavior, but also seems to involve a gross underestimation of the subjective role feelings play in psychological and moral life.⁵ It is not only true that almost anyone will feel instinctively upset about the death of a child, but this feeling can also be regarded as a subjective response to an event which is really bad, or unfortunate, or sad. The mere fact that humans are mortal does not remove the intelligibility of misfortune or loss in death.

Feelings also accompany our observations (awareness, or evaluations) of moral successes and failures. If someone were to tell me a lie, and I came to find out that I had been lied to, I might feel betrayed, upset, and indignant. Such strong feelings do not *make* the lie wrong. My feeling is a subjective accompaniment to my recognition of having been wronged. Someone else might hear of the lie (or read about it) and judge that it was wrong of that person to lie to me, given the nature of lies or their consequences, etc., without feeling particularly upset about the lie.⁶

⁵ Obviously, the first interpretation is more charitable to Epictetus (and if I were defending Stoicism today, I would try to make it more plausible). But what disturbs me is that the second interpretation corresponds more accurately to the literal interpretation of what Epictetus said. If he had meant, “then you will not let your feeling of upset ruin your life by causing you to grieve for an undue period of time,” then he could have said something to that effect.

⁶ It is probably correct to say that the neutral observer is able to see what it is about the lie that made me feel so upset, and might be able to see more clearly (or clear-headedly than me in the heat of my passion) the *reasons* for

But there is a particular unpleasant feeling that arises when one has been wronged (or thinks one has been), just as one often has a good feeling upon finding the solution to a difficult problem. The feeling does not constitute the wrongness of the lie any more than it comprises the solution to the problem. It plays an important subjective role, insofar as there is something that it is like to be wronged and something that it is like to be getting things right. These feelings are part of how we cultivate a sensitivity to the world: we remember how things feel, we imagine how similar things will feel in the future, and such feelings guide our evaluations and actions. How some object or event makes us feel is in itself a fact to be added to our moral considerations, but it is not merely a fact about our subjective (emotive) response to the value-neutral world. Our feelings are determined by *both* our characteristics (or sensibilities) and the facts of the world. Value ‘exists’ somewhere in the collision of human sensibility and the world. Sometimes, based in part on such feelings, we decide that it is the world to be changed, praised, or condemned; at other times, suspecting that our feelings have been contaminated, we try to change ourselves instead. We can appreciate along with Epictetus that our evaluations are colored by our attachments and concerns – our *character*. But the Stoic, whose ‘marks of one making progress’ are that ‘he blames nobody, he praises nobody, he complains about nobody, he accuses nobody,’⁷ having detached himself from whatever moral feelings he has by not reacting to them, risks losing the capacity to identify the moral significance of some feelings, or the capacity for feeling itself. If, as I have suggested, feeling has a job to do, then what the Stoic calls progress may run the risk of causing a regress in moral sensibility.

So, feeling is a subjective process which really tells us something about the world – namely, what the world feels like to a person with my kinds of cares and dispositions. Some of

thinking that lying is wrong. Of course, sometimes we *do* get upset or excited as observers: when our favorite soap opera character is betrayed, or when the hero of the novel prevails.

⁷ Epictetus, §48.

these cares and dispositions will be fairly common – perhaps almost universal among humans. But many of our cares (and the consequent dispositions to feel particular ways) can't even pretend to universality, and so there is a problem about how to decide what the *right* way to feel or judge is in many cases. I will have something to say about this issue at the end of the essay. The next section relates the notion of feeling as perceptual to the conception of values as analogous to secondary qualities.

2. Feeling as Moral Perception

The analogy between values and secondary qualities is supposed to suggest a way to account for the reality of moral properties and to make this compatible with their being dependent upon our particular perceptual capacities, similar to the way secondary qualities like color depend upon our being equipped to see colors. McDowell identifies the following as a breaking point in the analogy: “The disanalogy...is that a virtue...is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate “attitude” (as a colour is merely such as to cause the appropriate experiences), but rather such as to *merit* it.”⁸

The idea is that a purely causal explanation of how values bring about moral judgments omits a significant feature of moral properties. An apple's being red causes me to make the appropriate ascription of color, and justifies my belief that the apple is red. In the case of a virtue, it is not enough to say that the virtue causes a person to make an ascription of virtue, because it is not just that virtues cause people to identify virtues, but such ascriptions are merited, or *called for*, in a sense in which nothing particular is called for when I see a red apple. For example, say I see a group of hoodlums harassing an elderly woman. According to McDowell's story, a judgment that the hoodlums are doing something wrong is not simply

⁸ “Values and Secondary Qualities,” *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 143.

warranted, but it is furthermore incumbent on me as a moral judge to recognize this wrongness. If I fail to see anything wrong even though I am aware of exactly what the hoodlums are doing, then I might not count as a moral judge (perceiver) due to my failure to see that a judgment is merited in this situation.

As with colors, our perception of values depends upon our possessing a particular kind of sensibility. Furthermore, values, like colors, are individuated in terms of the kind of sensibility we have. If human color perceivers could not see red, then red would not count among the colors for us. McDowell writes, “Values are not brutally there – not there independently of our sensibility – any more than colours are: though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular apparent experience of them.”⁹ This view can explain, for example, how a value such as racial equality exists independently of particular instances in which the value is respected or ignored. The segregationist policies during earlier centuries in the United States were the upshot of a mass insensitivity to the value of racial equality. Movements toward desegregation represent an increased sensitivity to this value – a recognition that differences in skin color do not merit any difference in treatment (or, that such differences merit equal treatment, that such differences merit the judgment that the difference in skin color does not make a difference in how people ought to be treated). The value of racial equality – conceived as these kinds of considerations – was available to human moral sensibility all along, albeit ignored. The reasons for its being ignored are historical and cultural. How people are educated about racial difference shapes how such differences figure into their judgments and how they see the people around them.

⁹ “Values and Secondary Qualities,” 146.

Feeling figures into this picture because it is linked via beliefs and concerns to one's way of looking at a situation. On McDowell's view moral sensibility is fostered through training,¹⁰ and as suggested above, the feelings associated with particular experiences and beliefs can create strong subjective impressions. We feel, among other things, conviction with regard to some of our judgments, disgust about some actions, joy about others, and so on. Such feelings prompt and accompany judgments and actions, but this does not entail that the feeling *constitutes* the moral content of the judgment (or is the only reason for an action). When we recognize the incompatibility of some hideous action (genocide) with the innocent projects of others (living in one's homeland), and feel outraged by the injustice, it is the incompatibility and the hideousness, rather than the outrage, that make the act unjust and wrong.

Ideally, we want to have our feelings tied down to true beliefs about, for example, what kinds of considerations are morally significant. We want to be moved by the right things.¹¹ This requires engagement with the world around us, deliberation, and practice. Like other capacities, our ability to feel can be refined and improved, but can sometimes be deficient or directed toward the wrong features of things.

3. Seeing What's Really There: Magic Eye Pictures

In the 1995 movie *Mallrats* there is a young man who goes to the local mall every day and stands in front of a Magic Eye picture for hours, desperately hoping to see the sailboat in the picture, while other passers-by pause at the display for a brief moment, then remark, "Look, a sailboat," much to his dismay. Magic Eye pictures, or stereograms, are created by presenting separate

¹⁰ For example, see "Values and Secondary Qualities," 147.

¹¹ This is evident in the fact that we sometimes feel guilty for not feeling certain kinds of emotions on solemn or joyous occasions.

image patterns to the visual fields of each eye, which, when the viewer focuses her eyes in a particular manner, converge to form a three-dimensional image.

It seems correct to say that there really is a sailboat in the Magic Eye picture, although it takes some practice and manipulation of our own perceptual capacities to be able to see it. As a representation of a sailboat, the Magic Eye sailboat is as real a representation as any other. The sailboat is available only to particular kinds of perceivers – those with stereoscopic vision. But given that it is accessible to these perceivers, we are licensed to form expectations about what those who have stereoscopic vision ought to see in the Magic Eye picture. The character in *Mallrats* represents a form of unresponsiveness to a feature of reality which is constituted by one's not having the appropriate training in seeing the world in that particular way. A different form of unresponsiveness is depicted by a person who glances at the picture and simply denies that there is a sailboat. Consider the similarity between this person and someone deeply embedded in a racist culture who denies that there is such a thing as racial equality. This person may say things like, "I just don't see how anyone could believe such nonsense." Even if the racist person intends this comment to be a disparaging remark about those who endorse racial equality, it is also an admission of the racist's own inability to look at the world in a particular way. Barring some additional argument about the incoherence of racial equality as a value, the inability to see things this way is not itself an argument against the existence of the value. His inability to see things this way similarly decreases the chance that he will have any positive feelings about racial equality.

The case of the young man in *Mallrats* suggests that just as we sometimes have a feeling before we can pinpoint its precise cause, sometimes we know that there is something about what's right under our noses that we are failing to comprehend. We might not understand why a reason for action is a reason, even though we suspect that it is a reason, otherwise others

wouldn't advert to it in explaining why they act as they do. In hard moral cases, we might run out of reasons, or our reasons suggest conflicting choice, and we are forced to "go with our gut." It can seem that to resort to this metaphor means that our decision will be arbitrary. But we don't advise emotionally confused people to go with their gut, or tell depressed friends to trust their instincts. Going with our gut means something like choosing the route that *feels* like the right one.¹² That might sound a bit mysterious, but it is, I think, something all of us have done. When the choice matters, we generally believe that we are doing more than tossing a mental coin and that if we aren't careful, we might choose the wrong thing.

4. Moral Reality

Analogies, of course, will only take us so far. There is not only a metaphysically significant difference between colors and values but also a practical difference which seems to be just as troubling as the question of how any object merits – in McDowell's sense – a judgment.¹³ While there is general agreement about the colors of things, there is great disagreement about the values of things, and projectivists might seem better situated to account for divergence in moral judgment because they can make a direct appeal to the myriad sentiments of various persons and cultures as constituting the difference in moral judgment. Moral disagreement arises from a difference in sentiment, not perception. Because sentiment is constitutive of moral content, the source of moral disagreement is located in the feelings of agents rather than in the world. This line of thought suggests that there is no *moral reality*, but only diverse human psychologies.

¹² Again, the feeling points toward, rather than constitutes, the rightness. These ideas are connected to the Aristotelian notion of *judgment*. See, for example, Thomas Nagel's "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge UP (1979), 134-135.

¹³ In response to this latter problem, one may tell a story about the nature and place of morality in our lives. Moral matters merit judgment in McDowell's sense because moral matters – how we treat each other – are of central importance to how well we fare in life.

The realist à la McDowell can concede that moral disagreement is rooted in a difference in feeling. But feeling, as has been discussed, is perceptual. Our feelings are responsive to features of the world. In cases of disagreement, we may have two or more people who are responsive to different features of the same situation because they have different sets of concerns and dispositions. Consider what occurs when there is a clash between utilitarian and deontological approaches to the same moral problem. The disagreement is often about which value has primacy over the other.¹⁴ But the simple fact that there is disagreement does not entail that either party has failed to see something real about the situation: on the one hand, there may be general utility in doing X, and on the other hand, there may be agent-centered reasons for doing Y. Each person may be seeing a real aspect of the situation, but it's possible that neither of them sees the *whole* picture. Disagreement in ethics need not be taken as an argument against moral reality; disagreement is compatible with a complex moral reality in which there is more than one kind of value to be seen and more than one way to look at any given situation.¹⁵ To see a situation correctly may consist in the ability to take and appreciate different stances, to recognize whether one's own view (or feelings) leaves important matters unconsidered, to be able to give reasons for one's way of seeing the situation (to show others how to 'see the sailboat'), and to remain open to adjustment and reconsideration.

¹⁴ Thomas Nagel discusses this kind of problem in "The Fragmentation of Value."

¹⁵ McDowell seems to regard relativistic worries as a red herring in the debate between projectivism and realism for this very reason. See, for example, "Values and Secondary Qualities," 145, especially footnote 46.