

# Emotion-Enriched Moral Perception

## 1. What Is Moral Perception?

- Perceptual experiences present us with objects and their properties.
- What range of properties show up in perception (as opposed to thoughts)?
  - **Sparse:** we see things as having shape, colour, and position. We hear things as having pitch, volume, and duration.
  - **Rich:** we see things as crabs and laptops. We hear things as saxophones and the word “man”.
- If **Rich** is plausible, maybe we can perceive things as instantiating moral properties. Maybe you can see something as cruel or hear it as harsh.

**Moral perception:** a perceptual experience as of a moral property.

A potential case of moral perception: *“It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness of cutting a life short when it is in full stride.”* George Orwell, ‘A Hanging’ (1931)

- My focus: what follows for moral epistemology *if* human beings have moral perceptions.
  - Perception can be misleading, so the existence of moral perception wouldn’t entail the existence of moral properties
  - But we’re normally entitled to believe the contents of our perceptual experiences. So, moral perception promises might help us make sense of the idea that moral beliefs can be rational or epistemically justified.
- However, things get thornier when we start thinking about the mental processes through which moral perception could arise...

## 2. Cognitive Penetration: A Possible Mechanism for Moral Perception

- How could perceptions of rich properties arise in the mind?
- An example. I’ll play Clip A a couple of times, then Clip B, then Clip A again. ([youtu.be/GCtTtKKAhyE](https://youtu.be/GCtTtKKAhyE))
  - Clip A is the same before and after, but your experience is different. Different phenomenology, different content.
- How is this happening?

**Cognitive penetration:** when a nonperceptual state alters the content of a perceptual experience by affecting perceptual processing.

- Maybe moral perception arises through cognitive penetration.

## 3. Belief-Enriched Moral Perception

- What kind of cognitive penetration might lead to moral perception? One possibility is penetration by pre-existing moral beliefs.

**BEMP hypothesis:** *Orwell believes that it's wrong to cut a man's life short. This belief cognitively penetrates his visual experience, causing him to see the event as wrong.*

- *Problem 1:* Orwell says he's realizing something new, but BEMP only allows you to experience things that cohere with what you already believe.
- *Problem 2:* Plausibly Orwell's pre-existing moral belief would have to be justified for his moral perception to have justificatory power.
  - Compare:

**BELIEF-ENRICHED JULIA:** *By making a faulty inference, Julia has come to believe that that homosexuality is wrong. Julia sees a gay couple kissing and, due to cognitive penetration, literally sees this act as wrong. On the basis of this moral perception, she forms the belief that it's wrong for these men to kiss.*

- Is Julia's new belief epistemically justified? It seems not.
- BEMP won't have justificatory power unless you possess some justified moral beliefs to begin with. We were hoping to make sense of the idea that moral beliefs can be epistemically justified, but BEMP would have to rely on justified moral beliefs from some other source.

#### 4. Emotion-Enriched Moral Perception

- Many psychologists hold that emotions can cognitively penetrate perceptual experiences...
- ... and psychologists and philosophers hold that there's a subset of emotions that pertain to the moral statuses of the things they're about.

**EEMP hypothesis:** *Orwell feels a pang of guilt about what he and his accomplices are doing. This emotion cognitively penetrates his visual experience, causing him to see the event as wrong.*

- ~~*Problem 1:*~~ your emotions can outstrip and even conflict with your pre-existing moral beliefs ("recalcitrant emotion"). So, it's possible for EEMPs to go beyond the frontiers of the moral beliefs you already hold.
- ~~*Problem 2:*~~ Plausibly, Orwell's emotion would have to be justified for his moral perception to have justificatory power.
  - But for an emotion to be justified, it just has to be a fitting response to the information it is based on.
  - So, Orwell just needs to have (i) some nonmoral information and (ii) emotional dispositions that reflect the actual determination relations between nonmoral and moral properties.
  - Neither (i) or (ii) presuppose having justification for moral beliefs by any other means, so EEMP allows you to explain how moral beliefs can be epistemically justified without falling into a regress.

**Conclusion:** It's a viable empirical hypothesis to suppose that we have emotion-enriched moral perceptions. If so, such perceptions would explain how we can be epistemically justified in holding moral beliefs.