

Moral phenomenology: Foundational issues

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Abstract In this paper, I address the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* of moral phenomenology. I consider first the question What is moral phenomenology?, secondly the question How to pursue moral phenomenology?, and thirdly the question Why pursue moral phenomenology? My treatment of these questions is preliminary and tentative, and is meant not so much to settle them as to point in their answers' direction.

Keywords Moral phenomenology · First-person perspective · Meta-ethics · Normative ethics · Cognitive science

What is moral phenomenology?

The term “phenomenology” is ambiguous. In one sense, it refers to the philosophical tradition hailing from Husserl’s work. In another, it refers to the first-person study of the experiential aspect of mental life. Accordingly, the term “moral phenomenology” could be used to refer either to (1) *moral* philosophy in the phenomenological tradition or to (2) the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our *moral* life. In the next two subsections, I introduce each notion of moral phenomenology.¹

¹For a recent treatment of (1), see Drummond (2002); for one of (2), see Horgan and Timmons (2005).

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Moral phenomenology as moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition

Husserl's phenomenology is, first and foremost, a program in First Philosophy.² In the Kantian tradition, First Philosophy is concerned to vindicate our uncritical, pre-reflective worldmodel by anchoring it in solid, reflective ("critical") epistemic foundations. Husserl's program for pursuing First Philosophy is as rich as it is deep, and cannot be treated here with any seriousness. Nevertheless, let me offer an extremely rudimentary characterization.³

J.S. Mill notoriously claimed that ordinary objects are nothing but "permanent possibilities of sensation." This statement is problematic in two very different ways. First, an object appears to us in a variety of ways that go beyond bare sensation, and these non-sensory appearances – perceptual, cognitive, or whatever – inform our conception of the object.⁴ Second, whatever our conception of an object, surely the object is *more than*, rather than *nothing but*, that conception. In light of this, we might take a double retreat from Mill's thesis. In the first instance, instead of identifying objects with permanent possibilities of *sensation*, we would identify them with permanent possibilities of *appearance*. But ultimately, instead of assuming *identity* between objects and permanent possibilities of appearance, we would only posit an *intimate connection*, perhaps of a constitutive type, between the two. The upshot would be that although objects are not identical to permanent possibilities of sensation, they are constitutively connected to permanent possibilities of appearance.⁵ This more liberal version of Mill's idea is one plausible interpretation of Husserl's view.

The view is then fielded by Husserl in the service of First Philosophy. According to Husserl, while I may be mistaken that the table is red, I cannot be mistaken that it *appears* to me that the table is red.⁶ Appearances *are* the way they *appear*. Because of that, there is no appearance/reality gap for appearances. Therefore, when I know how an appearance appears to me, I thereby know how the appearance is *in and of itself*. So if the table is indeed constitutively connected to the set of all its appearances, then by attending to the appearances, I can ground my uncritical

²This comes through most clearly in Husserl (1931). But the program itself is set out already in Husserl (1913).

³It is, of course, a highly controversial matter just what Husserl's program was. I provide my own take on it, which is bound to differ greatly from other interpretations. For an interpretation similar in spirit to my own, see Sokolowski (2000).

⁴I work here with the widespread assumption that perception outstrips sensation. Certainly the perceptual appearance of an object affects our conception of it. Plausibly, objects also have cognitive appearances – appearances they present to our cognitive faculties. Indeed, there may well be a sense in which objects present to us purely intellectual appearances. Presumably, "intuitions" – as commonly appealed to in philosophical practice – are such.

⁵One natural thought might be that the relation between a set of appearances and the object whose appearances they are is the relation of a disposition to its categorical basis. Permanent possibilities of appearance are, after all, dispositional properties, and plausibly, the object itself, or perhaps its essential, individuating properties, are the categorical basis or bases of permanent possibilities of appearance.

⁶Perhaps this is not true in every sense of "appears"; but plausibly there is one sense in which it is. In any case, although Husserl himself maintained that knowledge of appearances is infallible, for the purposes of First Philosophy, the weaker claim that it is significantly more secure than other knowledge should suffice.

knowledge of the table in a much more secure brand of knowledge. I can ground my knowledge of something that transcends me in principle, namely the table, in knowledge of something that does *not* transcend me in principle (though does transcend me in practice), namely the set of all table-appearances.

This program depends on the cognitive act of attending to the appearances constitutively connected to objects. This involves at least two steps: first, bracketing the external, independent existence of the table in order to focus the mind on its appearance; then, using imaginative variations to consider the way the table *would* appear under different conditions. Ideally, the result would be hermetically secure knowledge of the set of all table-appearances, and hence of the table constitutively connected thereto.

Husserl developed this program in an extremely detailed and systematic manner for our knowledge of the realm of facts. But his remarks on the realm of values were more disparate. One way to see the work of Max Scheler is as an extension the program to the realm of values.⁷ Importantly, however, for Scheler (1913) values make their appearance primarily in emotion and affect, not in perception and cognition. That is, values and valuables appear to us most faithfully and lucidly in emotional experience.⁸ Therefore, to grasp an axiological object through the set of all its appearances would require applying something like Husserlian bracketing to emotional experiences and using imaginative variations to contemplate the manifold emotional/affective appearances the object might subtend.

Pursuing this project, Scheler developed a phenomenological system for the realm of values. At the heart of the system is a fivefold order of non-moral values, based on a correlative fivefold ranking of types of felt valuing.⁹ As for moral value, it consists simply in preferring positive values over negative ones within each rank, and higher values over lower ones across ranks. This particular structure of the realm of values – the supervenience of moral value upon non-moral values, as well as the division and ranking of non-moral values – can be “read off,” according to Scheler, from the intuitive, pre-reflective preferences implied in our emotional experiences.

In Scheler’s work, the Husserlian program for First Philosophy finds its ethical counterpart. In Levinas (1961, 1974), the epistemological character of the phenomenological program is *supplanted* by an ethics-based First Philosophy. Levinas argued that there is something special about the way other human beings appear to us, something absent from appearances of tables and trees. In our experiential encounter with the face of the other, the otherness of the other foists itself upon us. The other appears to us precisely as something that transcends us, and our experienced appearances, in principle. Indeed, the transcendence itself appears to us, in the sense that it is a distinctive phenomenological component of our experience of the other.

⁷This characterizes only the early parts of Scheler’s career.

⁸Conversely, all emotional experiences are at some level a valuing or preferring, and all refer back to a primordial kind of love.

⁹From lower to higher, they are: bodily, sensible values; instrumental values of need and usefulness; values of life; mental values, such as are associated with beauty and goodness; and values related to all that is divine or holy.

The first-philosophical significance of this is the following. Husserl thought that the appearance/reality gap ought to be bridged by focusing on the only entities whose appearance exhaust their reality – appearances. But Levinas suggests that the gap be bridged in the opposite manner: by focusing on the only entities whose appearance-transcending reality shows up in their very appearance – other human beings. Only in this way can a realist hope to make contact with things in themselves. That is, while in Husserl the appearance/reality gap is abolished by appearance colonizing reality, in Levinas it is overcome by reality invading appearance.

The philosopher whose work most clearly pursues moral phenomenology in both senses of the term – as moral philosophy in the phenomenological tradition and as first-person study of moral life – is Mandelbaum (1955).¹⁰ The centerpiece of his theory is the idea that moral experiences of “direct moral obligations” (i.e., experiences in which an agent takes herself to be bound by a moral obligation to perform a certain action in the situation in which she finds herself) exhibit what he called *felt demand*. This feature Mandelbaum describes as a *force*, which like any force has a *direction* and an *origin*. The direction of this force is *oneself*: we always experience moral demand as directed against us. And the origin of this moral demand is always experienced by us as lying outside of us, emanating from something other than ourselves.¹¹

In summary, although the phenomenological tradition has been primarily epistemologically driven, it provides a rich background for developing phenomenological analyses of concrete aspects of our moral experience. Recent work features phenomenological analyses of friendship (Sokolowski 2002), respect (Drummond 2006), and more. In any event awareness of foundational issues is central to the phenomenological school. For this reason, in what follows I will focus mainly on moral phenomenology as first-person study of moral experience, the theoretical foundations of which are at present much more obscure.

Moral phenomenology as first-person study of the experiential aspect of moral life

A perennial philosophical question concerns the relation between facts and values. It is often debated whether the distinction is *exclusive*: whether there are facts that are also values and/or conversely. It is not debatable, however, that the distinction is *exhaustive*: there is no third type of entity that is neither fact nor value.

Our primary vehicle for studying the realm of facts is science. Science attempts to uncover the way the world is, and we trust today that it has the general capacity to do so. Although much remains to be explained about the universe, we have a reasonable grasp of what an all-encompassing explanation would look like. However, there is one area in which scientific progress has been more limited: the nature of conscious experience. Although psychological and neurophysiological research has significantly augmented our *knowledge* of consciousness, there is a widespread sense that ultimately it has advanced only marginally our *understanding*

¹⁰But see also Sokolowski (1985).

¹¹For a much more detailed discussion of Mandelbaum’s work in this area, see Horgan and Timmons (2005, 2006a).

of consciousness. Moreover, it seems that the failure of science to discharge its normal function in this area is deep and principled, not an aberration. The problem is that science, with its third-person, objective methods, can tell us only about the mechanical aspects of consciousness, not about its experiential aspects. Arguably, this means that it can account only for what consciousness *does*, not for what consciousness *is*. For an understanding of what consciousness *is*, we need to employ some sort of first-person, subjective mode of access to our own consciousness.

The first-person study of conscious experience is often referred to as *phenomenology*. It is sometimes claimed that phenomenology is the only way to study subjective consciousness *itself*, as opposed to its *manifestation* in speech and behavior; or of what consciousness *is*, as opposed to what it *does*. Whereas neurophysiological investigations of the neural correlates of consciousness shed light only upon, well, the correlates, phenomenology is supposed to throw light on the thing itself, not merely its correlates. Similarly, whereas psychological models of consciousness portray the typical causal *relations* a conscious episode is implicated in, phenomenology will offer us a portrait of the *intrinsic* nature of the episode. In other words, neuroscience and cognitive psychology study the underlying and surrounding mechanics of conscious activity, not the inner feel of conscious experience. The latter is the sole province of phenomenology.¹²

Our primary vehicle for studying the realm of values is not science but moral philosophy. Moral philosophy has traditionally been divided into two main subfields: normative ethics and meta-ethics. The distinction is, very crudely, this: normative ethics asks which things are good; meta-ethics asks what it means for something to be good.¹³ Both have led to investigations into the psychology of agents and their personal values, that is, to *moral psychology*.¹⁴ One limitation of moral psychology as it has been practiced to date, however, is that it has focused exclusively on the mechanical, rather than experiential, aspects of moral perception, thought, deliberation, emotion, etc. It has attempted to uncover what function morally pregnant mental states perform in the agent's mental economy, not what it is like for her to undergo them. This limitation parallels the one we have encountered in connection with the scientific study of consciousness as part of the overarching study of the realm of facts.

The moral of the story should be clear: our study of the realm of values must receive its own phenomenological complement, a first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life. That would be *moral phenomenology*. Moral

¹²In putting things this way, I do not wish to commit to the view that science and phenomenology are incompatible, or that phenomenology is at odds with solid science. I only wish to insist that without phenomenology, science gives us an incomplete picture of the realm of facts. Whether phenomenology is a non-scientific add-on, or merely a complement to science as it has been practiced to date, is orthogonal.

¹³The two questions are clearly related, in that answers to one constrain answers to the other, but I will not concern myself here with just how they are.

¹⁴For example, on the side of normative ethics, one view is that what we ought to morally require of people must be constrained by what we can reasonably expect them to be psychologically capable of doing. This leads normative ethics quite straightforwardly into moral psychology. On the meta-ethical side, many have held that what it is for something to be good is partly a matter of who takes it to be good and under what circumstances. This again leads to the psychology of moral agents. These are just two examples of avenues that lead into moral psychology. There are others.

phenomenology would investigate the experiential dimension of morally pregnant mental states and processes, in the service of moral philosophy and psychology.

How to pursue moral phenomenology

In general, there are several preconditions for the viability of a field of research. Here are three particularly basic ones. First, we must have a more or less clear conception of the phenomena it targets. Secondly, we ought to have a preliminary reason to believe that the phenomena, thus conceived, actually exist. Thirdly, we must possess reliable methods for pursuing the study of these phenomena. There are probably other preconditions, and certainly other desiderata. Here I make preliminary remarks only on these three – as they pertain to moral phenomenology.¹⁵

Subject

There are at least five senses in which a claim about our moral life might be called “phenomenological.” Suppose someone claims that, phenomenologically, our judgment that slavery is wrong purports to correspond to an objective fact. The claim admits of the following five interpretations: (1) utterances to the effect that slavery is wrong tend to have the kind of superficial grammar statements of objective fact typically do; (2) whatever the grammar of such utterances, when a normal person is asked whether her judgment that slavery is wrong purports to describe an objective fact, she typically states that it does; (3) whatever she *states*, the person *believes* (tacitly no doubt) that her judgment purports to represent an objective fact; (4) whatever the folk *in fact* believe, the *commonsensical* belief to have is that this judgment purports to represent an objective fact; (5) whatever the person states and believes, when judging that slavery is wrong she undergoes an *experience* with the sort of phenomenal character typically exhibited by experiences as of objective fact.¹⁶

These five notions of phenomenology – grammar, folk statement, folk belief, commonsense belief, and phenomenal experience – have probably been intermingled to some degree in past usages of the term “phenomenology” in the relevant literature. But for the purposes of a first-person study of our moral life, it is the *fifth* notion that is the proper object of moral phenomenology. All other usages denote phenomena that can be fully studied from the third-person perspective. Not so this fifth notion. On this notion, the phenomenological claim under consideration means that our slavery judgments feel objective in that they instantiate a specific phenomenal property.¹⁷ Phenomenal properties are properties mental states instantiate in virtue of what it is like for their subject to undergo them (see Nagel

¹⁵For a thorough discussion of these and other fundamental questions regarding moral phenomenology, see Horgan and Timmons (2005).

¹⁶For a relevant discussion, see Horgan and Timmons (2006b).

¹⁷We may sincerely deny that our judgments have an objectivistic phenomenology, and it may be commonsensical to do so, but if the judgment does instantiate the relevant property, then the claim is true.

1974). This is the notion of experience that takes center stage in discussions of phenomenal consciousness in philosophy of mind.

Subject matter

Do morally pregnant mental states actually instantiate such intricate phenomenal properties? In other words, is there a moral phenomenality for moral phenomenology to investigate?¹⁸ We must make sure that the answer is Yes, lest we pursue a subject without subject matter.

Discussions of phenomenology in philosophy of mind have sometimes operated with an extremely thin conception of phenomenality that includes only sensuous qualities such as redness, bitterness, and pleasure. An explicit proponent of such a thin conception might be inclined to reject the existence of moral phenomenality.¹⁹

It might be thought that we could justify moral phenomenology even against the background of a relatively thin conception of phenomenality, inasmuch as even perceptual and emotional experiences can be morally pregnant. Watching hoodlums set a cat on fire for laughs, I can literally *see* that they are doing something wrong. Thus there is such a thing as moral perception. And certainly there is such a thing as moral emotion: experiences of indignation, for example, are the moralist's fuel. Since few adopt a conception of phenomenality so thin as to exclude perception and emotion, there is space for moral phenomenology even without taking on a thicker conception.

This option has important limitations, however. First, although I can see *that* the hoodlums are doing something wrong, arguably I cannot see *the wrongness* of what they are doing itself. The wrongness is not *visually* presented in my perception, a thin phenomenologist would claim, in that there is no *visual* phenomenal feature in my experience that corresponds to the wrongness proper. The defender of moral phenomenology would thus have to make the case for literal visibility of wrongness itself.²⁰ Secondly, restricting moral phenomenology to moral perception and emotion would leave out the great majority (and variety) of our moral life. Moreover, what is left out is arguably where our moral life finds its most important expression: in moral judgment and agency.

Better to justify moral phenomenology by adopting a relatively thick conception of phenomenality, then. Fortunately, in recent years the thin conception has been

¹⁸Here, and in the remainder of this subsection, I use the unlovely word “phenomenality” to denote the subject matter of “phenomenology,” i.e., the phenomenon or domain of phenomena that a phenomenological investigation targets. This is important to keep the distinction between subject and subject matter clear. In the remainder of the paper, I drop this practice and use “phenomenology” ambiguously to cover both subject and subject matter, trusting that context can do the disambiguation work for me.

¹⁹Sociologically, this seems to have to do with the traditional focus of philosophy of mind on the mind-body problem. If our main question is whether phenomenal consciousness is physically reducible, then in considering this question we ought to look at the most straightforward and unproblematic types of phenomenality, such as the reddish character of a visual experience or the painful character of a toothache. But my sense is that exclusive focus on these types of phenomenologically overwhelming experience has led some philosophers to expect that any phenomenality be similarly overwhelming. When then an unimpressive phenomenality is contemplated, the temptation is to deny its existence.

²⁰Furthermore, if she succeeds, her success would already introduce a degree of thickness in perceptual phenomenality.

giving way to an increasingly thicker one. For starters, it is often thought that perceptual phenomenology itself is quite rich, and involves properties that go beyond brute sensuous qualities.²¹ Thus, there is a purely phenomenal change involved in switching from seeing the duck–rabbit figure as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit. This suggests a visual phenomenality that outstrips bare colors and shapes and corresponds to categorial properties such as being a duck. Some philosophers have gone further to embrace altogether non-perceptual phenomenality. Thus, cognitive, doxastic states such as thoughts and judgments have been claimed to have their own distinctive phenomenal character.²² Further yet, some have made a case for an agential phenomenality for conative states, such as intentions and decisions.²³ A sufficiently thick conception of phenomenality would certainly cover the whole panoply of morally pregnant mental states.

It would not yet follow, however, that there exists a moral phenomenality. There are many phenomenally conscious states that occur on a Wednesday, but there is no Wednesday phenomenality. It might be worried that, likewise, although there are many phenomenally conscious moral mental states, there is no moral phenomenality.

To address this worry, we should ask ourselves what it is that the class of Wednesday experiences lacks. A natural answer is that although Wednesday experiences have a phenomenal character, it is not *in virtue* of being Wednesday experiences that they do. One might say that it is not *qua* Wednesday experiences that they have their phenomenal character. Likewise, it could be that although many morally pregnant mental states are phenomenally conscious, it is not *qua* morally pregnant that they have their phenomenal character. If so, to ensure that moral phenomenology has a subject matter, we must show that moral mental states have phenomenal character *qua* moral, that is, in virtue of being moral mental states.

There can be different views of what would be involved in moral mental states having phenomenal character precisely *qua* moral. One is that moral mental states would have a phenomenal character common and peculiar to them, that is, that there be a phenomenal property which all and only moral mental states instantiated. On this view, there is a clear *phenomenological signature* that moral mental states bear. A more liberal view would require only family resemblance, rather than strict uniformity, among the phenomenal characters of moral mental states. A third view (which I personally find attractive) separates the issues of commonality and peculiarity, requiring only family resemblance for commonality but strict uniformity for peculiarity. On this view, there are phenomenal properties that only moral mental states feature, though none that they all do.²⁴

This is not the place to fully address the issue of phenomenological signature. The discussion in this subsection serves merely to bring out two foundational commit-

²¹See, most conspicuously, Siegel (2006), but also Kelly (2004) and Masrour (2008).

²²The case is most thoroughly prosecuted in Pitt (2004), but see also Goldman (1993), Strawson (1994), Horgan and Tienson (2002), and Kriegel (2003).

²³See Horgan et al. (2003), Siegel (2007), Bayne and Levy (2007).

²⁴For relevant discussion, see Gill (this volume) and Sinnott-Armstrong (this volume) against the phenomenal commonality among all moral mental states and Horgan and Timmons (this volume) in favor. I am grateful to Mark Timmons for useful exchanges on this point.

ments of moral phenomenology: to (1) a relatively thick conception of phenomenality and to (2) something *like* a phenomenological signature of morality.

Method

Moral phenomenology can constitute a serious intellectual endeavor only insofar as there are clear, reliable, and practicable procedures and standards for forming and assessing phenomenological convictions. This is just to say that the meaningful pursuit of moral phenomenology, like any field of research, requires a sound methodology. It is sometimes felt, however, that in the realm of phenomenology more than elsewhere, the formulation of a methodological canon is bound to be particularly elusive.

For some purposes, this worry should not be overstated. In the writings of many phenomenologists, one often comes across compelling phenomenological descriptions of specific experiential episodes. In this context, such descriptions are evaluated simply by the degree to which they *resonate* with the readership's own first-person sense of the phenomena described. Thus, Levinas's (1961) long and detailed descriptions of our experiential encounter with the face of the other strikes the average reader as tremendously *illuminating* and *insightful*. Resonation, illumination, and insight are among the "softer" epistemological virtues that certainly apply to phenomenological claims.

Nonetheless, we are presented with a foundational difficulty when phenomenological *disagreements* arise. Suppose philosopher A proclaims that her judgment that slavery is wrong has an objectivistic phenomenology, while philosopher B insists that hers does not. Suppose further that both A and B offer detailed phenomenological descriptions of their judgments, and that the two descriptions resonate with us equally. How are we to resolve this disagreement? How can we tell who is right – A or B (or both, their respective phenomenologies being different)?

To make progress on this question, let us start by reconstructing claims of the form "my judgment J has an F-ish phenomenology" as a conjunction of two claims: (1) there is something F-ish associated with my judgment J, and (2) this F-ish "something" is a phenomenal feature of J. This is a useful maneuver, because more often than not, (1) is not in contention, only (2) is. Thus, when A states that her judgment that slavery is wrong has an objectivistic phenomenology, it would be less natural for B to deny that there is anything objectivistic associated with her judgment than to claim that the objectivistic "something" is not an aspect of the judgment's phenomenology proper. To be sure, it is *coherent* to deny that there is anything objectivistic associated with the judgment. But it is much more *plausible* to claim that the objectivistic "something" has to do, say, with the fact that the judgment is accompanied by a belief to the effect that the judgment has objective purport, or that the judgment is expressed by a sentence whose surface grammar is objectivistic. At any rate, that is the shape that actual phenomenological disputes tend to take. What is in contention is usually whether the sense that a mental state M is F-ish is to be understood phenomenologically, not whether there *is* a sense that M is F-ish.

The methodological question we face, then, is how to break a deadlock between two disputants A and B who agree that there is something F-ish about M, but disagree on whether this F-ish "something" is a matter of M instantiating a phenomenal property F. How might we arbitrate such a dispute?

This is a difficult question, but the first thing to note is that it threatens not only *moral* phenomenology, but any phenomenology.²⁵ The philosophy-of-mind community has yet to formulate clear standards for addressing such disputes. Elsewhere, I examined the type of argumentation philosophers have fielded on behalf of relatively exotic phenomenal features and attempted to extract the general method(s) they appeared to employ (Kriegel 2007). I discerned two main methods, which I call the *method of contrast* and the *method of knowability*. Neither is unproblematic, but both are powerful enough to potentially break an initial dialectical deadlock, by producing *prima facie* evidence for taking the contested feature to be phenomenal.

Suppose we agree that M is F (or at least that F is instantiated in connection with M), but are unsure whether or not F is a phenomenal feature of M. Oversimplifying, the method of contrast involves attempting to conceive a mental state M*, such that (1) there seems to be a *phenomenal* difference between M and M*, and (2) the best explanation for (1) is that M is F whereas M* is not. If such a phenomenal contrast is conceivable, it would lend support to the claim that F is a phenomenal feature of M. Using this method to determine whether my judgment that slavery is wrong has an objectivistic phenomenology would consist in the following. We would attempt to conceive a judgment which appears to be phenomenally different from my actual judgment, where the best explanation for this apparent phenomenal difference is that my judgment has an objectivistic phenomenology, whereas this other judgment does not. If such a phenomenal contrast is conceivable, we would have obtained *prima facie* evidence that my judgment has an objectivistic phenomenology.²⁶

The method of knowability – again, somewhat oversimplified – proceeds as follows. We are to imagine a subject who has no third-person means of establishing whether M is F, but who is nonetheless under the strong and stable impression that M is F. If such a subject is conceivable, it would suggest that she has some sort of first-person access to the fact that M is F. Such first-person accessibility, or knowability, provides evidence for (though it may not entail) that F is a phenomenal feature of M.²⁷

Much more needs to be said about the methodology of moral phenomenology.²⁸ To my mind, this is where the main foundational challenge for the viability of moral phenomenology lies.²⁹ But as I noted, the challenge applies with equal force to other forms of phenomenological investigation. That is, all forms of first-person study of

²⁵For relevant discussion, see Siewert (Forthcoming).

²⁶For a classical application of this method, or something very much like it, see Siegel (2006).

²⁷This is because, presumably, phenomenal features lend themselves more straightforwardly to first-person knowability. It is arguable that *only* phenomenal features do, which would make the method stronger.

²⁸Remember: the methods of contrast and knowability are not methods for *settling* phenomenological disputes, much less for forming methodological theses in the first place. They are merely methods for breaking a dialectical deadlock in the evaluation of competing phenomenological claims.

²⁹Gill (this volume) suggests an ingenuous but completely different method for studying moral phenomenology, which we may call the *historical method*. Gill notes that harvesting phenomenological reports from laypersons in experimental setups gives us extensive data, but the layperson's lack of conceptual sophistication may contaminate her reports. A philosopher's attending closely to her experience may provide her with more faithful data, but these data are too selective to allow for reliable generalization. Gill suggests a close study of phenomenologically relevant pronouncements by central figures in the history of moral philosophy as a way to collect conceptually sophisticated data that nonetheless has intersubjective depth.

phenomenal character are in dire need of much greater methodological transparency, and hopefully eventually a skeletal methodological canon. Just as this does not tempt us to discard visual phenomenology as a tool for understanding vision, however, so it should not dissuade us from pursuing moral phenomenology as a tool for understanding moral mentation.

Why pursue moral phenomenology

When examining the viability of moral phenomenology, it is important to look both at its theoretical foundations and at its theoretical ambit, its potential serviceability. In the previous section, we addressed the issue of foundations. In this one, I take up the issue of ambit. In particular, I consider how moral phenomenology could inform relevant research in meta-ethics, normative ethics, and cognitive science.

Moral phenomenology and meta-ethics

One way to pose the fundamental question of meta-ethics is as follows: are there external, mind-independent moral facts? Moral realism is the view that there are, anti-realism the view that there are not. There is also an intermediate position, according to which moral facts are akin to facts regarding secondary qualities (e.g., the fact that freshly baked bread smells good); this position is intermediate in that it construes moral facts as external but not as mind-independent.³⁰

These positions on the metaphysics of moral facts appear to lead to corresponding positions on the psychology of moral commitments. This is because there are straightforward arguments from the latter to the former. More specifically, so-called cognitivism about moral commitments tends to lead to realism about moral facts, while so-called internalism about commitments tends to lead to anti-realism about facts.³¹

Cognitivism is the view that moral commitments are cognitive states. If so, they represent the world to include certain facts about goodness, wrongness, etc. Such

³⁰Proponents of this sort of secondary quality account have tended to regard it as essentially realist (McDowell 1979). And indeed it is continuous with traditional realism in finding ethical facts in the external world. But to my mind there is a deeper sense in which the position – at least in some of its versions – is essentially anti-realist, namely, insofar as it finds the *source* of normativity inside ethical agents rather than outside them. Consider the judgment that apartheid is wrong. The wrongness of apartheid is to be identified, on the view under consideration, with the eliciting of a relevant negative response in relevant type of agent. But of course, apartheid elicits not only negative responses in some agents, but also positive responses in others. It elicits a negative response in the anti-racist, but a positive response in the White Supremacist. On one version of the secondary quality account, what makes apartheid wrong rather than right has to do mainly with the character of the agents in which it elicits those responses. It is something about the anti-racist that makes the eliciting of a negative response in *her* constitute wrongness. The White Supremacist must lack that ‘something’, for the eliciting of a negative response in the White Supremacist does not constitute wrongness (at least in the present context). In other words, it is some *internal* difference between the anti-racist and the White Supremacist that makes the eliciting of responses in the former but not in the latter constitute the instantiation of wrongness.

³¹The views on moral commitments only *tend* to lead to the views on moral metaphysics, in that there are exceptions to these rules. Some cognitivists are anti-realists (e.g., Mackie 1977), and some internalists are realists (Dancy 1993).

cognitive representations would be incorrect across the board if there were no such facts. But it is implausible that our moral life is nothing but a grand illusion. Thus if one adopts cognitivism and rejects the grand illusion, one must posit a realm of external, mind-independent moral facts to which our cognitive representations are answerable (and which make some of them correct and some incorrect) – as per realism.

Internalism is the view that moral commitments are inherently motivating.³² If so, any putative moral fact they represented would have to exhibit, in and of itself, the property of to-be-pursued-ness. Only so could representations of such facts be inherently motivating. But there is something queer about the property of to-be-pursued-ness. It is implausible to impute such a property on an entire realm of facts. So it is more plausible, the reasoning goes, to suppose that there are no such facts – as per anti-realism.

Against the background of a certain traditional picture of the mind, cognitivism and internalism are in tension with each other. The traditional picture divides the mind's operations into two non-overlapping groups. On the one hand, there are *cognitive* processes and states, of which belief is the paradigm, that attempt to construct a faithful representation of the way the world is in as “disinterested” and “objective” a manner as possible; on the other hand, there are *conative* processes and states, of which desire is the paradigm, that guide the subject's behavior and govern her fund of motivational impetus, her “conatus.”³³ The result is a “Humean theory of motivation” (Smith 1987) according to which inherently motivating states are conative rather than cognitive, and cognitive states are essentially descriptive rather than motivational. Against the background of the Humean theory of motivation, moral commitments can be either cognitive or motivational, but not both. Some philosophers have rejected the Humean theory of motivation, and have held a kind of cognitivist internalism that casts moral commitments as inherently motivating cognitive states.³⁴ These philosophers are typically led to the sort of secondary quality account of moral facts that is intermediate between realism and anti-realism. On this view, moral commitments represent certain dispositions, namely dispositions to elicit inherently motivating states in the right agents. For example, the judgment that slavery is wrong is correct iff slavery is disposed to elicit in the right agents a motivational inclination to disapprove of, avoid, or actively fight slavery.

So meta-ethical positions tend to correlate with, and thus find expression in, accounts of moral commitment. Realism correlates with the combination of cognitivism and externalism, anti-realism with the combination of non-cognitivism and internalism, and the secondary quality account with the combination of cognitivism and internalism.³⁵ Traditionally, the question whether moral commit-

³²The term “internalism” is in fact used in a bewildering variety of ways. But I use it just for the view stated in the text. For discussion of the different kinds of internalism, see Darwall (1992).

³³This picture goes all the way back to Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*, but it is particularly conspicuous in the contemporary “belief–desire theory,” according to which every mental state is a combination of beliefs and/or desires.

³⁴See especially McDowell (1979), McNaughton (1988), Dancy (1993).

³⁵I have already mentioned some proponents of the third combination. For a defense of the first combination, see Brink (1989). For a classic defense of the second one, see Hare (1952). There are no defenders of the coherent but utterly unmotivated combination of externalism and non-cognitivism.

ments are at bottom cognitive or motivational (or both) has been pursued through an examination of the representational and functional properties of moral commitments. The working assumption is that if moral commitments are representationally and functionally akin to paradigmatic cognitive states, then they ought to be treated as cognitive; if they are representationally and functionally akin to paradigmatic conative states, then they ought to be treated as conative or motivational.³⁶ This way of pursuing the question has a limitation, however. While the representational content and functional role of a mental state are central to its nature, another, equally central feature is the state's phenomenal character. It thus behooves us to examine the phenomenal character of moral commitments as well – which is of course to engage in moral phenomenology.

The phenomenological inquiry would presumably comprise two chapters. The first would seek to get clear on the phenomenological marks of paradigmatic cognitive and conative states. The second would examine the phenomenal character of moral commitments and its similarities and dissimilarities with paradigmatic cognitive and conative phenomenologies. If the phenomenal character of moral commitments is akin to that of paradigmatic cognitive states, this should be taken as evidence for cognitivism; if it is akin to that of paradigmatic conative states, that should be taken as evidence for internalism.³⁷ In this way, moral phenomenology could supply evidence for and against cognitivism and internalism, and thereby for and against realism, anti-realism, and the secondary quality account. We find here a direct relevance of moral phenomenology to meta-ethics.³⁸

It might be objected, very reasonably, that moral commitments do not *have* a phenomenal character, inasmuch as they are merely dispositional states. However, dispositional states have *manifestations* in occurrent conscious states, which do have phenomenal character. We can therefore recast moral phenomenology as studying the phenomenal character of occurrent manifestations of moral commitments. Do moral commitments manifest themselves in occurrent states with cognitive or conative phenomenology? Many views are possible: that the phenomenal character of occurrent manifestations of moral commitments is always cognitive and non-conative; that it is always conative and non-cognitive; that it is always both cognitive

³⁶If it is akin to both, it ought to be treated as both cognitive and conative, the Humean theory of motivation notwithstanding.

³⁷Horgan and Timmons (2006b) pursue in some detail the similarity of moral mental states to belief, and conclude that moral mental states have a cognitive phenomenology. At the same time, they maintain on independent grounds that such states have a conative phenomenology as well. (However, they do not infer a secondary quality account of the metaphysics of morals from that. They avoid that conclusion by embracing a deflationary account of truth conditions that severs the link between the truth-conditional content of cognitive states and putative worldly truthmakers (see especially Horgan and Timmons 2006a)).

³⁸In one way, phenomenology is inescapable for rigorous meta-ethics. Consider the traditional philosophical question of whether or not there are objective moral facts. When we say that slavery is wrong, are we describing an objective fact, or are we doing something very different? This is a meta-ethical question with a venerable history behind it. The phenomenological parallel would be this: Do we *experience* our moral judgments as purporting to describe objective facts? When we state that slavery is wrong, do we *feel* like we are stating an objective fact, or do we feel like we are doing something else altogether? Many philosophers have touched on this phenomenological question in the context of addressing the meta-ethical question. But the phenomenological question has rarely been given center stage in those discussions, and consequently the parameters for answering it have remained murky and implicit. The purpose of moral phenomenology is to thematize (in Husserlian jargon) such questions.

and conative; always neither; that it is sometimes one way and sometimes another within an individual's lifetime; across individuals; across cultures – and so on and so forth. Investigating this web of issues is the primary goal of meta-ethically motivated moral phenomenology.

Moral phenomenology and normative ethics

Life without perceptual experiences might be very boring. But it would still be worth living. By contrast, life without *emotional* experiences may very well not be worth living. Certainly emotional experiences are central to the value of one's life. They infuse life with meaning and determine, by and large, how good a life is for the one who lives it. The pursuit of the good life may therefore require the kind of understanding of emotional experiences that ought to be provided by moral phenomenology.

Consider, by way of illustration, the following problem (see Solomon 2002). In every major religion, there is a practice of routinely thanking God for all the positive elements in one's life. Thus, an Orthodox Jew is obliged to pause to thank God every time s/he eats bread. This practice helps focus the mind on what is positive in one's life, and demonstrably plays a central role in creating and sustaining well-being. Sadly, however, it is relatively absent in secular culture and lifestyle.

In one way, it is bound to be, since the secular person does not have a personal God to thank. But one might wonder if it would not be worthwhile, for those seeking secular flourishing or *eudaimonia*, to seek an appropriate "replacement" for the religious experience of gratitude. Since it is integral to the phenomenology of gratitude that it is directed at a personal, animate, conscious object (to whom one is grateful), a secular *eudaemonist* cannot quite embrace the practice of gratitude as it stands. She needs a replacement.

In search of such a replacement, we ought to take a closer look at the phenomenal components of the religious experience of gratitude. For although gratitude may require a relation to a personal object responsible for the grounds for gratitude, it is possible that some of the core components of that experience do not, and may thus be straightforwardly transferable to the secular life.

A central aspect of the religious experience of gratitude appears to be withholding or suspending the natural attitude of *taking for granted* the grounds for gratitude (that for which one is grateful). Perhaps one reason the Jew's obligation is to thank God for something as mundane as bread, rather than for various delicacies, is precisely that the former is something we are more tempted to take for granted. Likewise, our ongoing health, steady income, etc. are things we normally, in the "natural attitude" (to use a Husserlian phrase), take for granted. A central element in the religious experience of gratitude is the suspending of this take-for-granted attitude. Importantly, unlike full-blown gratitude, such suspending does not require a personal object.

An even more important component is *appreciation of fortune*. Once one stops taking for granted the positive elements in one's life, one can start considering them as fortunes. One *feels* fortunate – and not only *is* fortunate – to have one's health, income, etc. The feeling of fortune then becomes much more ubiquitous: one feels fortunate not only on the rare occasions of degusting delicacies, but also on the

mundane ones of having bread at arm's reach. This sort of fuller appreciation of one's fortunes strikes me as the core of the religious experience of gratitude and its *eudaimonistic* efficacy, and much more can be said about it by way of phenomenological analysis. For our purposes, its two central features are, first, that it is a positive, pleasant feeling, and second, that it does not require a personal, animate object.

One suggestion, then, for a secular replacement for the religious experience of gratitude would be this: the experience of *appreciation of fortune based on suspending the natural take-for-granted attitude*. This type of experience has enough phenomenological overlap with the religious experience of gratitude – without presupposing a personal object – to play a parallel role in sustaining secular well-being. A secular *eudaemonist* could thus implement the following dictum: induce in yourself experiences of the above type on a daily basis. What is important to note is that reaching this normative dictum required moral-phenomenological analysis. The above discussion thus serves as an illustration of the relevance of moral phenomenology to normative ethics.³⁹

But moral phenomenology may be central not only to the local task of devising moral and *eudaimonistic* precepts, but also to the more global task of constructing a general theory of morality and well-being. For instance, in classical, Aristotelian virtue ethics, the virtuous person not only does the right thing, but does it for the right reasons; and not only does it for the right reasons, but does so while harboring the right beliefs; and not only harbors the right beliefs, but also *feels* the right way about all of this.⁴⁰ If this is correct, then the fully virtuous person is characterized not only by her actions and beliefs, but also by a certain *experiential* dimension. What is this dimension and how are we to characterize it in general terms? That is, what is the phenomenology of virtuous agency? A full virtue ethic must include an answer

³⁹There may be a further important element in the religious experience of gratitude that is not reproduced in this proposed replacement. It is a sense of depending on a greater force that triggers a humbling effect. The relevant kind of humbling experience is a pleasant, and in some way satisfying and even calming, feeling. The sense of being handled by something larger and manifold more powerful than oneself involves a feeling of partial and temporary relinquishing of responsibility for the course of one's life. This sort of surrendering of responsibility often goes with a decrease in anxiety. Hence the calming effect. Unfortunately, this calming effect, and the experience of dependency that implies it, are not (constitutively) present in the kind of fortune-appreciation experience described above. But first, this experience of dependency is much less phenomenologically salient in gratitude than what *is* present in the experience described above, and second, there is no bar to inducing in oneself the sense of dependency independently and in isolation. For one is certainly hostage to the vicissitude of a nature, which are indeed blinder and to that extent more brutal than a God's would be. It is not difficult to induce in oneself a feeling of awe at the universe's grandeur, and appreciation for the multitude of natural factors that had to conspire to make our life possible. Such independent inducement may in fact be preferable, inasmuch as the feeling of surrendering responsibility for one's own lot is arguably something one would want to induce in oneself in moderation, certainly much less frequently than the appreciation of fortune. So the religious dictum of inducing in oneself daily gratitude to God could be replaced in a secular lifestyle with the dictum of inducing in oneself daily the experience of appreciation of fortune by suspending one's natural take-for-granted inclination, and often complement this with inducement of awe at the grandeur of nature.

⁴⁰The *phronimos* not only avoids discriminating against people of other races, she also *feels* the wrongness of race-based discrimination. It is not as though she does harbor some racist feelings, but overcomes them in acting and believing in an anti-racist manner (although there may well be a degree of virtue involved in that as well). Rather, she does not feel the pull of racism to begin with.

to this question, and answering this question requires engaging in moral phenomenology (see Annas, this volume).⁴¹

There is a more general question concerning whether phenomenological considerations may be marshaled for or against a moral theory. Horgan and Timmons (2005) argue that the phenomenology of moral deliberation is manifestly not consequentialist, and that this counts against consequentialism. This reasoning may create a *souçon* of naturalistic fallacy. After all, a consequentialist could argue that though our moral phenomenology is not consequentialist, it *ought* to be. Glasgow (unpublished manuscript) offers a more plausible way of making phenomenological considerations bear on moral theory, one which presupposes two principles. The first is that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’: it is the case that Agent ought to φ only if Agent can φ . The second is that what an agent can and cannot do is constrained by phenomenology: minimally, there is a phenomenological state P, and an action φ , such that if Agent is in P, then Agent cannot φ . These two principles entail that what an agent ought to do is constrained by her phenomenology: minimally, there is a phenomenological state P, and an action φ , such that if Agent is in P, then it is not the case that Agent ought to φ .

Moral phenomenology and the cognitive sciences

A recent development in moral philosophy is the establishment of extensive contact with empirical research. Twentieth-century moral philosophy had produced a plethora of clever thought experiments. Around the turn of the millennium, it was realized that these were not inherently destined to be merely *thought* experiments, and researchers have started using them in neural and behavioral studies to tease out distinct strands in the average agent’s moral thinking and decision-making.⁴²

This *rapprochement* has been mutually beneficial, with moral philosophy furnishing cognitive science with particularly revealing material and cognitive

⁴¹The relationship between consciousness and morality presumably bears on questions in political philosophy and philosophy of law as well. Here is one potential example. Following the 1886 US Supreme Court decision in *Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, American law treats collectives and corporations as persons, wherefore they are granted the rights of persons, such as first amendment protection on free speech. Although well enshrined in American law, it is important to examine whether this position is philosophically defensible. The key question is what the distinguishing features of persons are, and whether collectives and corporations exhibit those features. A natural thought is that a person is essentially the kind of thing that can have, or undergo, conscious experiences. If this is the case, then it is rather implausible to maintain that collectives and corporations are persons, since no corporation has ever had a conscious experience. An alternative view, however, is that a person is essentially the kind of thing that can make decisions and act on them, and more generally function as an autonomous, self-propelled agent. On this view of persons, it is quite plausible that collectives and corporations qualify as persons (thus, we do say such things as “Microsoft decided to release its newest product in February,” thus ascribing decisions and actions to a corporation). It is crucial to determine, then, which of the two conceptions of persons – as essentially conscious and experiential beings or as essentially active and agentive beings – is the more compelling.

⁴²Perhaps the best known neural studies are Greene’s (2005; see also Greene and Haidt 2002; Greene et al. 2001) and the best known behavioral ones are Knobe’s (2005, 2006). Greene conducted imaging studies in which he presented subjects with various trolley scenarios from the philosophical literature while examining patterns of brain activity as his subjects considered them. Knobe collected subjective reports about similarly revealing morally pregnant scenarios. For further relevant work, see Batson (this volume), Haidt (2001), and Miller (2001).

science offering moral philosophy a refreshingly new angle on some of the latter's perennial concerns. But a similar *rapprochement* remains to be effected between cognitive science and moral *phenomenology*. The neural and behavioral studies to have taken place to-date have not discriminated between conscious and non-conscious moral mentation. There are several reasons to do so, and one simple reason to think that doing so would implicate moral phenomenology.

It is well documented that many mental functions can be performed either consciously or non-consciously. Thus both neural and behavioral evidence of non-conscious sense perception, face recognition, lexical processing, memory retrieval, etc. is legion. The most striking case is probably blindsight, where lesion to the primary visual cortex results in complete loss of conscious sight without complete loss of non-conscious visual processing capacities (see Weiskrantz 1986). However, typically the non-conscious performance of a mental function is somewhat functionally deficient relative to conscious performance. Blindsight patients, for example, are significantly more prone to visual misperception than normal subjects.⁴³ It appears, then, that consciousness normally makes an important contribution to the performance of the relevant functions. Therefore, to the extent that an experimental study does not discriminate between conscious and non-conscious moral mentation, it is insensitive to the functional significance of consciousness in moral mentation.

Furthermore, one goal of research in this area ought to be the identification of neural (and behavioral) correlates of moral consciousness. But the usual methodology for pursuing this sort of research requires the juxtaposition of conscious and non-conscious execution of the same functions (Baars 1997). In this way, we treat consciousness as a scientific variable like any other. Naturally, the juxtaposition of conscious and non-conscious moral mentation would require studies that discriminate between the two.⁴⁴

The reason we would need moral phenomenology to study moral mentation in a way that discriminates between conscious and non-conscious performance is simple: to know that a particular type of episode is a potential "juxtaposee," we need to know which aspects of moral mentation qualify as conscious. And although for some aspects of moral mentation this may be a straightforward matter, for other, more intricate ones it may not.

Conclusion

A well-known philosopher, who shall remain nameless, once said that we urgently need a philosophical theory of modal operators. One would be forgiven for wondering whether the language of urgency applies very aptly to philosophical theorizing at all. But if ever there was an urgent need for a philosophical theory, the

⁴³For an early review of relevant evidence, see Farah (1995).

⁴⁴In addition, the identification of neural correlates of specific types of consciousness always represents important progress toward the identification of neural correlates of consciousness (NCC) in general, that is, neural correlates of consciousness *per se*. To that extent, pursuing the project of identifying the neural correlates of moral consciousness would be instrumental in the larger pursuit of the NCC.

current need for a moral phenomenology is surely it. The direct relevance of moral experience to the central questions of meta-ethics and normative ethics, and indeed to the pursuit of happiness, stands in stark contrast to the infrequent, disparate, and unfocused manner in which its study has been pursued to-date. The purpose of the present issue of *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science* is to take an overdue first step toward the rectification of this state of affairs.

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