

Introduction

A PERENNIAL QUEST OF PHILOSOPHY is to construct an adequate conception of the human person and to frame sound standards for human conduct. In the domain of ethics, standards of interpersonal conduct are central. Ethical conduct is essential for human civilization, and in our globalized world, with its increasing international interdependence, nothing is more important than universal adherence to sound ethical standards. Is there any moral knowledge that can serve as a basis for such standards? That is one of the broad questions motivating this book.

With the successes and intellectual prominence of modern science, philosophers and many others who think about the status of ethics have been concerned with the apparent disparity between our ways of arriving at moral judgments and our ways of arriving at beliefs and judgments by using scientific methods. A great many contemporary academics and others maintain—or simply presuppose—that if we have any moral knowledge, that knowledge must be broadly empirical and ultimately amenable to scientific confirmation. This view is implicit in the most common kind of contemporary naturalism. Much could be said about what counts as naturalism, and Chapter 3 will explore the extent

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to which my theory of moral perception may be considered naturalistic. For our purposes, it is sufficient to bear in mind a wide conception of naturalism. In very broad terms, we might think of it as the position that, first, nature—conceived as the physical universe—is all there is; second, the only basic truths are truths of nature; and, third, the only substantive knowledge is of natural facts.¹ Science, of course, is taken by naturalists to be the highest authority concerning what the truths of nature are.

Naturalism as most commonly conceived contrasts not only with supernaturalistic theism but also with epistemological rationalism. In outline, rationalism in epistemology is the view that the proper use of reason, independently of confirmation from sense experience, yields substantive knowledge (as opposed to knowledge of logical or analytic propositions). A robust rationalism extends to including certain sorts of moral knowledge as among the substantive kinds that may be described as *a priori*.² Such knowledge, though not *unscientific*, is *non-scientific*. There is, however, a major point of important agreement between rationalists and naturalists, even those naturalists who are empiricists. It is that perception is a major source of possible knowledge of its

¹ Detailed discussion of what constitutes naturalism and whether normative notions, such as obligation and intrinsic goodness, can be naturalized is provided in my “Can Normativity Be Naturalized?” in *Ethical Naturalism: Current Debates*, ed. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Shea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169–93.

² How rationalism may be conceived is discussed, and the position defended, in my “Skepticism about the A Priori: Self-Evidence, Defeasibility, and *Cogito* Propositions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149–75; and how rationalism applies to moral knowledge is indicated in chaps. 1 and 2 of my *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

objects and that any genuine knowledge of the physical universe depends on perception.

My main project in this book is to show how perception figures in giving us moral knowledge and how moral perception is connected with intuition and emotion. In showing this, I will combat stereotypes regarding both intuition and emotion, especially the view that they are either outside the rational order or tainted by irrationality.³ In doing this, I will at many points criticize one or another form of *intellectualism*. By this I mean the tendency to treat perception, cognition (especially belief formation), and rationality itself as dependent on intellectual operations such as inference, reasoning processes, and analysis. Rationality is not intellectuality, and intellectual activity is not entailed by rationality in belief, action, judgment, or other elements that may be appraised in the dimensions of truth or rationality.

More broadly still, I hope to realize two complementary aims: to lay out major elements of a moral philosophy that reflects a well-developed epistemology and to make epistemological points that emerge best in exploring the possibility of moral knowledge. I try to do this from the perspective of a philosophy of mind that makes it possible to understand human agency and cognition with minimal posits: roughly, without burdening the mental life of rational persons—and doubtless our brains—any more than necessary for understanding the data. Here I join forces

³ Here my concerns overlap those of Jonathan Haidt in his much-discussed work on social intuitionism, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist View of Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–34, and related work by developmental psychologists who study ethics. For the latter, see, e.g., Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley, eds., *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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with many colleagues in neuroscience and with many philosophers holding views more naturalistic than mine. In this spirit, and from the standpoint of both epistemology and philosophy of mind, I aim at clarifying both the nature of intuition and emotion and their evidential role in yielding justified moral judgments and moral knowledge. In doing this, especially in Chapters 4–7, which concern the ethically important interconnections among perception, intuition, and emotion, I will identify some of the main standards of the normative ethics that seems to me most plausible.

If this overall project succeeds in the way I intend, it provides a foundation for affirming the possibility of moral knowledge that is, on the one hand, based on perception and hence empirical and, on the other hand, comprehensible in terms of a framework of a priori moral principles that are not empirical and are knowable by reflection. Moral philosophy spans the empirical and a priori domains, and I shall argue that it does so in a way that makes possible both objective moral judgments and cross-cultural communication in ethics.