

FAILURES OF SIGHT: AN ARGUMENT FOR MORAL PERCEPTION

J. Jeremy Wisniewski and Henry Jacoby

I. INTRODUCTION

There are three common explanations of moral failure. These explanations involve appeal to ignorance, *akrasia*, and evil—in brief, not knowing the good, not having the strength of will to do the good, and not wanting to do good. All of these explanations persist in the earliest literature, philosophical and otherwise.¹ This stands to reason: they do seem to capture the broad terrain of much moral failure.

Ignorance, *akrasia*, and evil (or, put in a less loaded way, *maliciousness*) cover the instances of moral failure that are most readily encountered—but they are not as exhaustive as they perhaps initially seem. Indeed, a concentration on these categories to the exclusion of others has led to a theoretical dead end in many of the most heated moral disputes. This alone would provide sufficient reason to inquire into other possible modes of moral failure—but there are reasons in addition to this rather pragmatic one. As will be shown in what follows, an *additional* category of moral failure is required to effectively explain what is wrong with things like racism, heterosexism, and simple inconsiderateness.² This additional moral category stems from the notion of moral perception, the acknowledgment of which enables an account of moral failures

not captured under ‘evil,’ ‘*akrasia*,’ and ‘ignorance.’ Moreover, the notion of moral perception provides fertile philosophical soil; it facilitates re-conceiving some troublesome areas of moral disagreement.

In what follows, an argument aimed at establishing that appeal to moral perception is necessary to account for specific instances of moral failure will be provided. Following this, it will be argued that this notion must be distinguished from the idea of moral judgment. A suggestion about how a discussion of moral perception might advance the debate when considering issues like factory farming, same-sex marriage, and torture will then be considered. Finally, it will be claimed that moral perception remains agnostic on the question of moral properties.³ To begin, it is necessary to get clear on the distinct types of moral failure with which this essay began.

II. VARIETIES OF MORAL FAILURE

In what follows, the concentrate will be primarily on ignorance and *akrasia*. This is so, not because maliciousness is any less significant, but rather because *instances* of maliciousness are seemingly easy to identify. Indeed, they easily reflect common judgments about moral failure (when politicians speak of an ‘axis of evil,’ however lamentably, they are appealing to this category). Moral failures

resulting from ignorance and *akrasia* are also common—but they require an elucidation which the appeal to ‘evil’ does not (at least in this context).

An immoral action is explained by ignorance if knowledge of the wrongness of an action would have led the acting agent to form the intention to *avoid* the action in question. An immoral action is explained by *akrasia* if one cannot deny that the acting agent had the intention to avoid the action, but the agent nevertheless engaged in said action without external coercion.⁴ Examples of such moral failures exist aplenty. Consider first an example of moral failure as a result of ignorance:

I was making frequent use of cocaine at that time to reduce some troublesome nasal swellings, and I had heard a few days earlier that one of my women patients who had followed my example had developed an extensive necrosis of the nasal mucous membrane. I had been the first to recommend the use of cocaine, in 1885, and this recommendation had brought serious reproaches down on me. The misuse of that drug had hastened the death of a dear friend of mine.⁵

Freud, in analyzing one of his own dreams, is brutally honest in recognizing his own moral failings. He blames himself for the death of his friend, as well as for those patients whose use of cocaine at his bidding led to declining health, or worse. He regards these instances as “evidence of lack of medical conscientiousness.”⁶ His concern with these instances, however, *demonstrates* his conscientiousness: his problem is not one of lacking care for his patients; the problem, rather, is not knowing *how* to care for them.

Freud’s self-described moral failure, then, is one of ignorance. His belief about the medicinal value of cocaine resulted in disastrous consequences for those who heeded his advice. What makes it clear that the moral failure is one of ignorance (rather than *akrasia*, or lack of conscientiousness) is this: had

Freud known about the consequences of his advocacy of cocaine, he surely would not have published a paper endorsing its use, nor recommended it to his patients.

Akratic, or weak-willed action, on the other hand, does not involve a failure of knowledge. On the contrary, the akratic knows what the good requires—it is simply that, despite the formed intention to engage in correct action, the akratic is unable. The spirit is willing, the proverb goes, but the flesh is weak.

There are many examples of weakness of the will that suitably illustrate it: addictions of all sorts provide the most common point of departure for the discussion of *akrasia*. Despite some philosophical puzzles surrounding akratic action, it is generally well understood: an akratic action is one in which my intention to do *x* is overridden by a desire to do *y*, where *x* and *y* are mutually exclusive. I give in to my desire, despite my rational intention *not* to give in to this desire. In this respect, *akrasia* is a kind of irrationality; it is not, however, a failure of knowledge.⁷

Leontius, the son of Aglaeon, was going up the Pireaus along the outside of the north wall when he saw some corpses with the public executioner nearby. He had an appetitive desire to look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and turned himself away. For a while he struggled and put his hand over his eyes, but finally, mastered by his appetite, he opened his eyes wide and rushed toward the corpses, saying: “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches; take your fill of the beautiful sight.”⁸

Plato here provides a textbook case of *akrasia*: reason and appetite conflict, and appetite triumphs. Leontius *knows* that he should not look lustfully at the corpses—it is this that explains his outrage at himself after he gives in to his appetite—but he cannot help himself. His *intention* is to avoid looking (he covers his eyes), but this is not enough. His action and his intention do not here connect in the appropriate way. Leontius lacks self-control, and thus finds himself failing to do

as he intends. This is moral failure that has nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with will.

To these two examples of moral failure must be added the third category mentioned above: the *malicious*. Some immoral actions can be explained only by appeal to the malicious character of their perpetrator; they result not from ignorance and not from *akrasia*. Such actions are engaged in partially *because* they represent affronts to morality; in some cases, one must even overcome reluctance of will to engage in these actions.⁹ The most noteworthy instances of malicious action are also the most infamous: the Marquis de Sade, for example, seemed to delight in his sadism at least partially *because* it shouldn't be done. It simply wouldn't be as delicious if it were morally acceptable.¹⁰

There is little need to dwell on these examples. They are as familiar as the oldest literature. While one might debate how best to characterize a particular example, the basic mechanics of the above examples are clear to all.¹¹ What is less clear, it seems, is that there are cases of immorality that *cannot* be captured by this trinity of failure. Examining such cases is the key to more fully understanding the notion of moral failure—and also to uncovering the importance of moral perception. It is to this class of examples that the discussion now turns.

III. THREE EXAMPLES

To make the case for the importance of moral perception of course requires more than simply collecting a few examples. Examples themselves do not good theory make. Nevertheless, they *are* a good place to start. The aim in this section is to lay out some examples where the moral failure in question seems best explained by an appeal to moral perception. Obviously, the descriptions of the examples alone will not suffice to establish this. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made to anchor the discussion in these cases. Objections to

this explanatory strategy are considered in Section IV (below).

Example 1 (E1)

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch asks the reader to imagine the following case:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. . . . M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. . . . D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. . . . M's outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.¹²

This example is meant to demonstrate the importance of perception in assessing morality. As Murdoch insists, there is no change in behavior in the mother—no outward sign of the new way in which she perceives her daughter-in-law. The point of this insistence is to reveal that outward signs are not the only morally-relevant element of a situation that can (and ought to be) morally assessed. For Murdoch, one must also investigate the way agents *see* the world around them—the moral vision that they maintain.

Importantly, Murdoch maintains that such vision should be assessed even if it could *never* culminate in any type of action.¹³ To see the world aright—to have correct moral vision—Murdoch contends, is good in itself. This is *not* to say that seeing the world aright is entirely independent of action (it isn't). Rather, it is to point out that the value of

seeing things aright does not derive from the actions to which such sight leads.

To explain the moral change in *M*, then, it will not be sufficient to pick out some actions (her actions have not, after all, changed). But there does indeed seem to have been some kind of change. Imagine that *M* has come to see *D* more *accurately*. In this respect, one might suggest, what has changed are simply the beliefs that *M* has about *D*. Murdoch is quick to point out that this characterization of the example leaves something essential out about the change *M* has undergone: “What *M* is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see *D* accurately but to see her justly or lovingly.”¹⁴ While this need not exclude the possibility of forming correct beliefs about *D* (indeed, it might even *require* having true beliefs about *D*, if the perception is indeed to be just), neither is it the case that forming correct beliefs is *sufficient* for seeing someone “justly and lovingly.” What is required is not just seeing someone correctly, but seeing them correctly *in the right way*. To see *D* *lovingly* is not merely to acknowledge the facts about *D*. It is also to comport oneself to those facts in a particular way; to *see* those facts as having a certain significance. Thus, an appeal to changed beliefs on *M*’s part, Murdoch contends, fails to capture the change in *M*. What is required to acknowledge this change, Murdoch insists, is acknowledging a change in the way the agent perceives the world.

Example 2 (E2)

In discussing the perception of blacks in Europe and elsewhere, Frantz Fanon remarks “on the clinical level, I am reminded of the story of the young woman who suffered from a kind of tactile delirium, constantly washing her hands and arms ever since the day a Jew had been introduced to her.”¹⁵ This response is pathological only in its extent. The response itself is not different *in kind* from typical racist, sexist, and heterosexist actions: the refusal to shake hands, to eat in certain restaurants,

use certain facilities, or enter certain areas are of the same cloth. As a typical, if extreme, example of racism, then, this example will function quite well as an instance of a moral failure of perception.

To improve the example, allow it to be refined with a little imagination. Imagine doctors trying to convince the above woman of the irrationality of her response to meeting a Jewish person. Further imagine the woman eventually *conceding* that her response is irrational, but nevertheless continuing to engage in the compulsive cleaning of her hands and arms. How does one explain her action? Clearly, claiming that she has false beliefs about Jews will not do: she acknowledges, it is imagined, the irrationality of her actions, and insofar as she acknowledges this, she cannot be accused of ignorance in any straightforward sense.¹⁶ It is possible to imagine her coming to understand that anti-Semitism is an irrational and morally reprehensible attitude, despite the fact that her washing continues.

Is her failure, then, an instance of *akrasia*? Although giving in to the desire to compulsively scrub her skin is certainly an instance of weakness of will, the moral failure of the woman is *not* a failure of will (unless of course excessive washing is a moral deficiency). In this imagined case, the woman acknowledges the irrationality of her action, and acknowledges that any racist attitudes maintained are morally reprehensible. She might even routinely proclaim ‘I abhor racism.’ Her problem is deeper than judgment, and more difficult to deal with than weakness of will. Her problem—her moral failure—is constituted by *seeing* the world in a particular way: she regards Jews as unclean. This is evidenced by her action. There is no contradiction in imagining her reciting the reasons why one *should not* regard Jews in this way. For this reason, one cannot claim that her failure is a result of ignorance. Likewise, one cannot claim that her action is a failure of

will. After all, she has no *desire* to perceive Jews as she does.

Her failure is thus a failure of moral perception: she does not see the world aright; she fails to see the world as she should. It is this, rather than mere ignorance, that will be explanatory in many (though not all) instances of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and the like.

Example 3 (E3)

A third and final example (our own) is as follows: Jeff has been out of town. His friend Ellen has promised to pick him up from the airport. On the day Jeff is to return to town, Ellen is also offered a dinner invitation that will prevent her from picking Jeff up in a timely manner. Ellen is not forgetful. She recognizes the conflict, but she simply is not concerned about it. “So I’ll be a couple of hours late picking up Jeff. It isn’t such a big deal.” She thus opts to go to dinner, despite her promise to Jeff. When Jeff arrives back in town, he sees that Ellen is not there to greet him. He phones Ellen. She explains that she is having dinner, and that she will be there to get him in an hour or so. Disgusted, Jeff tells her to forget it, and takes a cab.

Ellen’s actions here constitute a case of moral failure. Not only does she fail to fulfill her promise, she does so *intentionally* (she acts against duty, as Kant would say). Perhaps Ellen’s failure is a failure of perception. This seems, at a minimum, arguable. There will be those who insist that this is a case of *akrasia*: after all, Ellen has given in to a desire to accept a dinner invitation *after* forming an intention to fulfill a promise. Desire here overcomes intention, and hence there is akratic action.

So be it. But consider now a third friend, Cheryl. Let’s imagine that Jeff tells Cheryl what has transpired, with appropriate disgust at the incident. Cheryl, however, can’t understand why Jeff is so upset. “So she would have been late, and you decided to take a cab.

What’s the big deal? What’s wrong with her going out to dinner and having a little fun?”

While Ellen might be akratic, this does not explain Cheryl’s reaction to the situation. It is easy to contend that Cheryl is guilty of moral failure. She doesn’t see that Ellen was inconsiderate. It can be supposed, moreover, that when Jeff told his story to other friends, they all agreed that Ellen had done something wrong; *these* friends perceived the situation accurately.

Not only is Cheryl’s failure not explained by *akrasia* (as Ellen’s might be), it is also not explained by appeal to evil or ignorance. Cheryl doesn’t wish Jeff to be upset or unhappy; she’s his friend, after all. Likewise, she’s not being malicious when she says that Jeff should not be angry with Ellen. And Cheryl’s failure is not a matter of (propositional) ignorance either. Jeff has explained to Cheryl that he expects people to keep their promises, and that it was wrong to expect him to wait around at the airport when he was tired and anxious to get home. Cheryl understands all the details of the situation, and certainly acknowledges that promises ought to be kept; she just doesn’t see that Ellen should be held accountable *in this case*. Her failure is not simply a failure of reason in this instance. Failures of reason involve the misapplication of a particular principle—where one recognizes that there is a moral problem, and makes a mistake in discerning what that problem is, or how it relates to the principles in question. Cheryl’s error is more basic than that. She has *not* misapplied a principle. She has not even seen that there is a moral issue here at stake; she has not reached the point where she even *considering* the correct or incorrect application of a principle.¹⁷ Cheryl’s failure is thus best explained, or so the authors contend, as a failure of moral perception. Others see that Ellen was inconsiderate, while Cheryl does not.

IV. PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES, AND JUDGMENTS

The above cases seem, in certain respects, rather disjointed. The authors of this article nevertheless contend that they are united at least by the fact that the notion of moral perception is required in order to articulate the moral failures present in these cases.¹⁸ There are, of course, serious objections to the view that the notion of moral perception offers anything in *addition* to more run-of-the-mill moral terms like ‘attitude’ and ‘judgment.’ There is also a serious worry that a commitment to moral perception requires a commitment to some concrete account of moral properties, and that such an account would render the very notion of moral perception implausible.¹⁹ Each of these objections will be dealt with in turn.

The first objection to the proposed view is that old moral terms are simply being redressed in fancier clothes—but nothing *new* has been articulated in the notion of moral perception. This objection might take a number of forms, two of which are worth considering in some detail. The first can be put as follows: in all of the above cases, one sees the presence of certain *attitudes*. One can explain the actions of those in each of the above examples by investigating the attitudes they have towards those with whom they interact. There is no need to appeal to anything like perception in these cases. Indeed, the fact that the woman in E2 *differs* so much from other agents would be difficult to explain by appeal to perception, but relatively easy to explain by appeal to attitude. Thus, what is helpful in the category of moral perception is not new, and what is new is not helpful.

The problem with the term ‘attitude,’ as with most terms referring to subjective states, is that it suggests that the agent with the attitude might have this attitude independently of any particular facts in the world. Although one might insist that attitudes *do* relate to

particular facts in the world, as attitudes are *intentional*, the insistence seems misplaced. While the term ‘attitude’ is certainly *sometimes* intentional (one can have attitudes toward or about some intentional object), it is not always so (one can also have a ‘defeatist attitude,’ for example). More importantly, however, is that even if attitudes are related in *some* sense to facts in the world, they are not related to those facts *epistemically*. Attitudes lack epistemic force: one’s attitude can be poor, it is true, but it cannot be *false*.

The same is not true of perception. A perception always involves adequacy conditions that are simply not present in relation to attitudes. My perception of *x* can be veridical or not—it can adequately capture the intentional object of my experience or fail to capture it—and these adequacy conditions depend on my relation *to the thing perceived*. The attitude I then form in regard to what I perceive, however, cannot be assessed in the same way. While the attitude might be irrational, or inappropriate, it cannot be *false*. In the above examples, the problem is *not* a problem of appropriateness or rationality. The problem is one of perception. In E2, for example, the imagined agent simply does not see the world as it is. This fact cannot be captured by mere appeal to attitudes.

There is a further difficulty accounting for the moral failures present in E1–E3 by appealing to ‘attitudes.’ The notion of ‘attitudes’ presupposes the notion of the thing perceived. In this sense, it is a derivative notion, and hence does not capture the immediacy present in cases of moral perception: I perceive a red barn, and then am angry about its disarray. My perception of the barn depends on *the barn*, whereas my attitude depends on *an antecedent perception*. While there are certainly morally reprehensible attitudes, such attitudes are not as immediate as moral perception: they do not capture the fact that a person or situation is *seen* in a certain way; the appeal to attitudes only captures instances in which

the seen person or situation inspires a certain attitudinal reaction in the perceiver.

Finally, the claim that differences in attitudes are more easily explained than differences in perception (a claim that was part of the initial objection) seems false. First of all, as will be suggested in the following section, there can be *pervasive* instances of moral blindness; moral perception can fail in the majority of persons in a society. If the above objection stands, then the reply is clear: even though certain moral attitudes might explain differences more effectively than moral perception, moral perception explains *similarities* more effectively than an appeal to attitudes.

This objection, however, does not stand. Even if one grants that extreme differences in moral experience are often difficult to explain, the same applies to extreme differences in *non-moral* experience. When people begin seeing smurfs and goblins, explanation is not a matter of course—it will require some work. One shouldn't expect moral perception to be any different.

Moreover, differences in attitude are *not* particularly easy to explain. Much as perceptions require a rich causal history to be made sense of, so too do attitudes. If someone has an extraordinarily hostile attitude toward some football team, for example, an explanation of this attitude will involve *more* complexity than an explanation of how this person perceives that team playing a particular game. The reason for this is straightforward: any explanation of an attitude will require an explanation of the perception presupposed by the attitude, and hence will be more complicated than an explanation of perception alone.

Having dealt with the objection that the proposed view represents a slightly modified way of talking about attitudes, it is now possible to deal with the claim that moral perception is actually a disguised way of talking about moral *judgments*. This second objection, in other words, amounts to the

claim that instances of *judgment* are simply being misdiagnosed. There are complex and simple judgments, the objection goes, and the examples invoked above simply involve the most basic kinds of judgment. The fact that they are basic, however, gives no occasion to claim that such judgments are *perceptual*.

To see what is problematic about this view, it will be useful to consider Lawrence Blum's reply to just this sort of claim. In *Moral Perception and Particularity*, Blum argues that

[m]oral perception . . . cannot be identified with moral judgment. In a given situation, moral perception comes on the scene before moral judgment; moral perception can lead to moral action outside the operation of judgment entirely; and, more generally, perception can involve moral capacities not encompassed by moral judgment.²⁰

Moreover,

[i]t is moral perception that constructs what an agent is faced with as "a (moral) situation" in the first place. The idea of moral judgment as bridging general rule and particular situation depends on a prior individuating of "the situation." It is moral perception which does that individuating or construing of the situation, thus providing a setting in which moral judgment carries out its task.²¹

As is clear from these passages, advocacy of the category of moral perception does not entail the rejection of moral judgment as a category. Rather, it entails recognizing that moral judgments admit of significant perceptual pre-conditions, and that these pre-conditions are themselves morally assailable. Judgment simply does not capture the immediacy of moral perception, it is instead a response to such perception.²² As was apparent in E2, perceiving persons as unclean could occur *at the same time* as judging that said persons should not be *regarded* as unclean. This cannot be explained if one thinks of moral perception as just another term for 'moral judgment.'

Further, consider again E3. Cheryl *might* have made the appropriate moral judgment (though, in the case described she did not) because she respects Jeff and didn't want to risk damaging their friendship. Based on her respect for Jeff's opinions on such matters, she might even come indirectly and reluctantly to admit that Ellen was wrong to abandon her promise to Jeff. But this recognition would be based on her respect for Jeff's moral sense; she still doesn't see it. Cheryl could come to judge *correctly*, but still fail to see what was morally problematic in Ellen's actions. Again, one can see that judgment and perception are not identical.

Of course, one might respond that *all* perception involves judgment of some sort. It is not the charge of this article to settle whether or not this is the case. Even *if* all perception involves judgment *of some sort*, it is *not* judgment of the usual sort. To see this, one need only inquire what *sort* of judgment perceiving some *x* involves. One typical response to this query is to claim that perceiving some *x* is to judge that *x* is the case (to 'take *x* to be true,' as the German equivalent 'wahrnehmen' suggests).

Even if perceptions are judgments of a certain type, they cannot be judgments of *this* type. This can be demonstrated rather easily: one can judge that one's perceptions do not correspond to reality. If perception is judging that *x* is the case, then it would be possible to judge that *x* is the case while also judging that it is not the case. This would happen in any instance when one doubted what one perceived (as when one judged that what one currently judged to be the case was not currently the case). It is obvious that such simultaneous, contradictory judgments are impossible—at least for rational creatures such as human beings. Hence, the judgment account of perception will not work.

Assuming it is right that the moral faculty under consideration is neither an attitude nor a form of judgment, one might still object

that it is *not* a form of perception either. Consider, e.g., the following remarks by Colin McGinn:

The moral faculty cannot be perceptual in any literal sense since there is no sense-organ devoted to ethical fact, and any sense-organ can be used to acquire factual information on which to base ethical judgments. . . . The only serious respect in which ethical knowledge resembles perceptual knowledge is that it can be basic, that is, not arrived at by inference. But that does not warrant the use of the word 'perception' any more than basic logical or mathematical knowledge can.²³

It is the contention of this article that McGinn is mistaken. First, referring to the faculty responsible for moral knowledge as a form of perception has a long history. It is present in Aristotle, where he compares it to mathematical perception—and it is already present in Socrates and Plato.²⁴ McGinn would no doubt say that the mathematical and mystical perceptions of Aristotle and Plato respectively also should not be considered forms of perception (since there's no sense-organ devoted to these either); but historical usage suggests a wider notion of perception than McGinn is willing to allow.

While all perception involves use of the senses, the senses alone would make for incredibly poor perceptual faculties. Memory and various other cognitive functions must function appropriately if perception in any robust sense is to be present in an agent. What makes some perception the *kind* of perception it is (moral, aesthetic, mathematical, or other) will therefore depend on many factors—and certainly not simply on the sensory organ(s) one is employing.

Consider what might be called the logical sense of human beings. It can be said that one 'sees' how to do a proof in the predicate calculus, or 'sees' that a step follows logically from earlier steps. What does such 'seeing' involve? Certainly, perception of some sort is involved (one uses one's eyes

to see the formulas, after all). Why isn't it correct to label this logical perception then? Saying this is a mistake because there is no logic sense-organ seems to rely implausibly on a simplistic understanding of perception in general—one that is much narrower than both historical and standard usage.

Again, one could argue that there are only basic perceptions of the five senses, and that the data taken in are then worked on by human cognitive faculties to produce beliefs or judgments that may be categorized as moral, aesthetic, and so forth. While this alternative story has its appeal, it ignores the immediacy, the non-inferential nature of such cases.²⁵ It is this immediacy that warrants calling cases like E1–E3 perceptions as much as the ordinary cases. Further, if the main argument of this paper is correct – if an additional category is needed to account for moral failures – how better to characterize this category than as a form of perception? As seen above, it is not equivalent to either attitude or judgment; perception thus seems to best capture what is involved in the cases described above.

V. THE RELEVANCE OF MORAL PERCEPTION

The notion of moral perception promises vast rewards in this inquiry into some of the perennial, as well as some current, moral debates. In fact, the category of moral perception might facilitate a new approach to some of the current debates in applied ethics. By considering some particular cases (such as factory farming), it is hoped that recognizing failures of sight as a category of moral failure has significant implications for the way certain issues are approached, as well as the way certain agents are dealt with.

Consider the case of an agent named Jack. Jack has read detailed descriptions of the conditions prevalent on factory farms. He does not accept the view that animals are not moral patients—he recognizes that cruelty

to animals, even if one can derive immense pleasure from such cruelty, is morally reprehensible. In fact, Jack would even concede that deriving pleasure from such cruelty is evidence of moral depravity. When presented with arguments against factory farming, Jack readily concedes that these arguments work—and yet he refuses to change his dietary habits; he refuses to stop supporting factory farms.

To see what is here at stake in more detail, presume that Jack is confronted with the following argument:

1. If one's actions support cruelty to animals, then one should avoid those actions.
2. Supporting factory farms (eating factory-farmed meat) supports cruelty to animals.
3. Therefore, one should avoid supporting factory farms (eating factory-farmed meat).

Simply assume that the premises in this case are true. The conclusion is thus also true, as the argument is an instance of *modus ponens*. Let it further be stipulated that Jack accepts the premises, and recognizes the validity of *modus ponens*. It might be claimed, in this case, that Jack's failure to act in light of this argument represents a kind of irrationality on Jack's part. This is a tempting conclusion, but one that is not entirely satisfactory. There are many arguments of this form that produce putatively action-guiding conclusions, but which have little effect on human beings. Consider the following argument:

1. Persons in the United States should save children when saving them will cost those persons little.
2. Persons in the United States can save children who are starving in nations around the world for very little cost to those persons.
3. Therefore, persons in the United States should save starving children.

It seems obvious that the conclusion follows in this argument. It likewise seems obvious that this argument has had little effect on human beings, as there are still plenty of starving children in the world, despite the ready availability of this argument. Can it then be said that *most* human beings are irrational?

Undoubtedly, many will want to answer this question in the affirmative. Before doing so, however, it is important to see what such an endorsement would be tantamount to: it is one thing to say that everyone has moments of irrationality (this seems true). It is quite another thing to say that most people are incapable of acting on the basis of a practical syllogism. This latter claim is far too strong. Unless one is willing to say that most human beings are entirely irrational (and hence that reason has little to do with action), then the failure of response to a practical syllogism such as the one above (or the one Jack confronts) must be explained in another way.

One likely explanation, it seems, is simply in terms of something like hope: Jack recognizes that he has heard many seemingly convincing arguments for various conclusions, and many (if not most) of these arguments have turned out to be wrong. Jack thus contends that there is in all likelihood a counter-argument to the factory-farming one (or the starving children one), and satisfies himself by allowing the hope for an as-yet-unknown counter-argument to exist. This explanation, it might be objected, is just another form of irrationality: hope despite the evidence is hardly proof that Jack is rational.

This is a fair complaint. But what is of interest here is not so much the irrationality of hope, but the explanation of it in particular cases. Of course, many factors will be necessary components in the excavation of why a particular agent hopes that a given argument is wrong while another simply acts on the argument. But part of what is involved in the distinction between these two cases is a different kind of *recognition* (on the part

of an agent) of the force of the argument being given: one person sees a particular instance of modus ponens as a reason to act in a certain way (to stop eating meat, for example). Another person sees it as an annoyance, and hopes that there is some other argument to counter this one. Regardless of the causal explanation of the divergent reactions of two such persons, the fact that these persons regard the arguments in a particular way suggests that there is a difference in the *perception* of the agents.

Now, assuming that factory farming is in fact morally unjustifiable, the question here is as follows: what explains Jack's lack of response to the available arguments, and what can be done about this lack of response? As is undoubtedly clear, appeal to the standard examples of moral failure will not adequately capture Jack's case. Jack assents to the arguments against factory farming. He recognizes their force, and he recognizes what they seem to require (*viz.*, action). Jack simply hopes that the conclusion is false. In this case, though, the explanation of hope seems to require reference to the way Jack *sees* (or understands) the argument in question. Jack is rational: he recognizes the validity of the argument, and the power such an argument has, given the purported truth of the premises. Jack simply does not take the argument as a reason to change his dietary habits. This is best explained by an appeal to Jack's phenomenology: he doesn't experience the argument as powerful, and this is so precisely because he lacks proper moral perception.

One might initially object that Jack's case can be better explained as weakness of the will. But Jack's case is not an instance of weakness of will: the problem is not that he has particularly strong desires to eat meat (or, more carefully, to save a few extra dollars by not buying factory farmed meat). The problem is not that he intends to stop supporting factory farms and this intention is circumvented by forceful desires. Rather,

the problem is that, despite the persuasiveness of the arguments, Jack fails to form an intention regarding factory farming to begin with. As seen above in the case of Leontius, akratic action is action in which one's rational intention falls prey to a more powerful desire; *akrasia* is a rift between intention and action caused by desire. Jack's problem is substantial, but it is not this one: Jack never forms the intention to begin with, and hence there is no need for desire to stand in contrast to intention. Jack's failure is neither a failure of reason nor a failure of will. The failure is one of *sight*.

If this diagnosis is correct, prolonged discussion of the arguments will have no real impact on Jack. Thus, if the aim of argument in applied ethics is to guide action (and what else could it be?), there will be cases where it is simply impossible for argument to meet its end. This is *not* to say that argument will never be useful, *nor* is it to say that there will be cases where argument helps no one at all. The point here is rather that there will be rational agents who are nevertheless unmoved by argument, and that this state-of-affairs can best be explained by appeal to a failure of moral sight. To respond to such cases as Jack's, what is required is *not* more argument. What is required, rather, is an alteration in perception.

Jack's case is not a particularly rare one. In fact, it seems likely that many are in precisely the same position. Indeed, it might well be the case that *all* persons are in Jack's position when it comes to particular issues: many recognize that the conditions of factory farms are abhorrent, that these should not be supported, etc., and yet nothing is done. The same sort of analysis might well apply to shopping at Wal-Mart, or failure to give adequate money to fight world hunger, or even failure to support the commitments of same-sex couples. Perfectly rational people can acknowledge the powerful arguments on all of these moral fronts, and yet remain

totally unmoved to action. This shows that the arguments are insufficient, at least in some cases, to promote action.

The significant question that emerges from this analysis, then, is this: what can be done, in addition to offering argument, to prompt people to alter their actions in a way that reflects their rational commitments? What can be done to facilitate seeing things anew, in a way that terminates a case of moral blindness? The answer to this question will have a bearing on attempts at moral pedagogy, but also on understanding the limitations of the philosopher's conceit: that reason is a sufficient tool for guiding action. Although a complete answer to this question is well beyond the scope of this paper (indeed, it is likely the work of a lifetime), a few things can be said.

Anecdotally, it is worth noting that the most convincing way to get someone to give up factory-farmed meat is to show them the daily operations of a factory farm. Often, this sort of activity is criticized as merely an appeal to the sentiments of the agent viewing such footage. Such an appeal, it is argued, should not be taken as seriously as rational argument. If arguments against factory farming (or torture, or the death penalty, etc.) cannot carry the day, the objection continues, then there is no reason to give up the practice being criticized.

If the argument so far is correct, however, one should not expect argument to carry the day in many cases. The reason for this is precisely that argument aims at correcting mistakes of rationality. If not all moral failures are mistakes of rationality, then not all moral failures will be amenable to correction by reason; something else will be required. Importantly, this is in no way to claim that there is not an important role for argument in the moral sphere. Persons do make mistakes of rationality, and this *is* one way in which persons fail morally—but it is not the only way, or even the most important.

The aim of this analysis has not been to demonstrate that, for example, factory farming is wrong. While the authors of this article think it is, it has not been the point of this section to demonstrate this by argument. Indeed, if what has been argued is correct, such an argumentative demonstration will often be impossible, and one will need to aim at correcting vision rather than logical prowess. Moreover, the aim here has not been to attempt to show how moral perception might solve any particular issue—it has only been to show how it might *be used* to solve a given issue. If the former had been claimed rather than the latter, the argument might rightly be accused of begging the question. It is not sufficient, after all, to simply insist that one's opponent doesn't 'see' one's point.

But this does not entail that appeals to moral perception are necessarily question-begging either. When one continuously insists that animals don't feel pain, the appeal to the central nervous system of the animal will likely do much less than simply watching an animal suffer. Likewise, when one insists that same-sex couples should not be married, no amount of argument will have the same effect as getting to know a lovingly committed same-sex couple who want to express their commitment by participating in one of society's basic institutions. To offer one more example, pragmatic appeals to the utility of torturing in particular cases are not likely to be overcome by argument alone. If torture is always wrong, even in so-called 'ticking time-bomb' cases, far more will be accomplished in establishing this by watching someone being tortured than will be accomplished by examining in detail the relations of premises to conclusion.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A full-blown theory of moral perception is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. The goal has merely been to demonstrate the necessity of positing a notion of moral percep-

tion to adequately account for moral failures which cannot otherwise be explained. The article has further gone on to suggest some useful applications of such a notion. Nonetheless, some indication should be provided, albeit briefly, about where the current authors stand on some further important issues.

It was earlier stated, perhaps rather unhelpfully, that what makes a perception the kind of perception it is can depend on many factors. So here it must be asked: What is it that makes for moral perception? Following Starkey, it seems that there are three basic avenues to pursue when attempting to answer this question.

First, it may be that there is some internal property (or properties) that all moral perceptions share. The property may be what is perceived or what in fact causes a certain perceptual state. Second, while there might be no particular property or properties that are detected in cases of moral perception, it may be that such perceptions are alike in the sense that they produce distinctive kinds of actions and/or judgments.²⁶

A third approach, defended by Starkey, rejects the above suggestions in favor of what might be called an externalist approach. All moral perceptions are (in his words) "morally appraisable." Moral perceptions thus share a common property, according to Starkey, but said property is neither perceived nor causal. It is rather a feature that is externally applied. As he says, "the moral appraisability of the perception is dependent on and arises from the institution of morality."²⁷

While either of the first two approaches is consistent with the current view, it is unclear whether or not Starkey's is. As indicated earlier, the existence of real cases of moral failure presupposes some form of moral realism. If there are real moral properties that are either detected in perception or have distinctive causal effects on actions and/or judgments, then moral realism is assured. But if such properties are denied (as Starkey

does), and what makes for moral perception is simply the fact that it is appropriate to label it as such, then the case for realism is unclear. It would depend, it seems, on what grounds the ‘appropriateness.’ Starkey’s approach seems to be instrumentalist. If this is right, then although he has made a case for the existence of moral perception, *it is not the sort of moral perception that could account for moral failure*, and thus, is not of interest here.

Now if there are moral properties, as demanded by either of the first two approaches above, what of their nature? For many, the greatest worry is articulated by Mackie:

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.²⁸

Mackie’s “argument from queerness” does not trouble us. For one, the worry that moral entities could not be the type of entities naturalists could embrace is based largely on acceptance of Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy argument—an argument here rejected for the usual reasons.²⁹ Secondly, as seen in the earlier reply to McGinn, no special faculty of perception need be posited for normal perceptual experiences to count, in some instances, as moral perceptions. Importantly, though, no *particular* account of moral properties needs to be embraced for the current analysis to work. The aim of this article has not been to provide a complete analysis of moral perception. Rather, it has been to show that there is indeed a fertile philosophical terrain here to investigate—one that promises to teach much about moral failure as well as possible moral progress.³⁰

*Hartwick College and East Carolina
University*

NOTES

1. The first two, however, seem to have philosophical pride of place. Plato is often read as defending the view that *all* instances of immorality could be explained in terms of some type of ignorance: to know the good, he claimed, is simply to do the good. (It will be left as an open question what Plato means by knowing the good, though it’s arguably best understood as a form of perception.) Aristotle recognized that failures of will could result in moral failure, and hence made room for *akrasia* as a source of immorality.
2. These will not be explored in any detail. That would require a book. The current analysis will, however, make an explanation of the moral failures in these cases apparent.
3. It is not, however, agnostic on the question of moral realism. The claim that there are real instances of moral failure presupposes moral realism of some sort. Importantly, however, the authors do not think that any *particular account* of moral realism is presumed.
4. It will be left as an open question whether or not some notion of *internal* coercion is required to make sense of akratic action.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (Avon Books, 1998), p. 144.
6. *Ibid.*
7. See, for example, Gary Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of the Will,” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 86 (1977); and Donald Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

8. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 439e–440a.
9. The case of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is a nice example of such a case. Raskolnikov wants to murder a pawn broker *because* it is immoral, and he must struggle to carry out the action. That such an example is easily intelligible to the reader is sufficient to dissuade one from worrying about the fact that it is fiction.
10. For an interesting and elucidating account of maliciousness as a moral category, see Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
11. One example of a dispute about what *kind* of moral failure is operative is the dispute about how to explain the actions of Nazi officials. Hannah Arendt seems to advocate an ignorance/akrasia account (people like Eichmann were both terrifyingly ignorant and woefully weak—see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994]). Goldhagen, on the other hand, claims that many of the actions of Nazi officials (like Police Battalion 101) cannot be accounted for in these terms. To explain their actions requires a recognition of their maliciousness. (See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* [Vintage Press, 1997]).
Obviously, it seems clear that different participants in Nazi activities might well require different explanations. Perhaps Eichmann was ignorant and the members of Police Battalion 101 were malicious. As this article hopes to show, however, there is a fourth category that has been left out of this dispute—and it is a category that seems more suited to explain the *inaction* of many of the citizens of Germany.
12. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 16–17.
13. Murdoch asks the reader to imagine that the mother-in-law dies immediately after changing her view, or that she becomes incapacitated, if one wants to insist that *some* actions would be different. If one insists that there would still be counter-factuals true of M, one might just grant the point. Nevertheless, it is still here maintained that the current *characterization* of an improvement in perception is superior to a description of this case that fails to acknowledge such perception.
14. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, p. 22.
15. The example occurs in passing in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1991), p. 160. Fanon's peripheral example is here used only because it is so lucid.
16. There are different senses of the term 'knowledge,' and hence also different senses of 'ignorance.' One might distinguish propositional from perceptual knowledge, for example, as a means of distinguishing propositional ignorance (not knowing the content of some 'that' clause) from *perceptual* ignorance (being unable to see certain things). If someone objects that the woman in the above example is in fact *perceptually* ignorant, the authors are happy to have an intellectual ally—for this is exactly what this article will be arguing.
17. The difference between errors of reasoning and failures of sight will be discussed in more detail below. An analogy might nevertheless be helpful at this point: Consider two ways in which one might fail to find a correct solution to a proof in logic. In one instance, an agent understands exactly how to proceed, in light of the logical rules, but makes a mistake in the application of the rules along the way (perhaps misapplying DeMorgan's Law). In another instance, an agent—although she knows all of the possible logical operations—simply does not see how these relate to the current proof. She doesn't know how to proceed because she sees no way in which the rules apply. The first case is a failure of reason (the agent makes a mistake in applying the known rules); the second case is a failure of logical perception (the agent fails to see that the principles apply *at all*).
18. One might here object that 'moral perception' is too broad a category itself, as there is nothing that unites all accounts of moral perception. In a recent article, Charles Starkey has attempted to address this worry. While the authors do not fully embrace the conception of the category of moral perception

Starkey defends in that article, he has certainly made the case that one can *operationally* unite the various conceptions of moral perception currently in the literature in a useful and interesting way. Briefly, moral perception is that which is *morally appraisable*. See Charles Starkey, "The Category of Moral Perception," *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 32, no. 1 (January 2006). Starkey's view will be discussed briefly below.

19. This is the sort of worry that is addressed by J. L. Mackie's argument from queerness, as well as by Harman's account of the burning cats. See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); and Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). For a nice response to Harman, see Sarah McGrath, "Moral Knowledge by Perception," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 18, "Ethics" (2004). Responses to Mackie are too numerous to list. For one well known reply, see John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Quality," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

20. Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity*, p. 31.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

22. This does not entail, of course, that judgment is preceded by *moral* perception, even if it is preceded by perception.

23. Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 59.

24. Indeed the Socratic claim that ignorance is the cause of all immoral action is best construed as a kind of perceptual ignorance of the Good. See Lecture 3 of Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good*.

25. The objection that errors of perception are actually errors of understanding can be addressed in much the same way. Although all of the argument needed to deal with this objection is presented in piecemeal fashion above, it will be useful to gather it here to avoid any potential misunderstanding.

If one were to object to our view by claiming that the failures in E1–E3 are merely failures of understanding (or perhaps 'interpretation'), it would first be necessary to get clear on two possible readings of 'understanding' (the same two readings apply to 'interpretation').

First, understanding might be the result of the synthesis of sensory information with prior cognitive commitments (this would be a roughly Kantian model of understanding). On this view, perceptions would be required *prior* to any formation of understanding, and hence failures in understanding would lack the immediacy required to capture E1–E3.

Second, understanding might be understood much more widely as (some part of) the cognitive content already embedded in perceptions. A failure of understanding, in this respect, would be a failure to have the right kinds of perceptions. This is the view of understanding found in the *Verstehen* tradition, for example, and presupposed by claims about the theory-ladenness of perception. If one takes 'understanding' in this sense, though, there is nothing particularly objectionable in saying that failures of perception are failures of understanding. Indeed, if perception and understanding are intimately bound together, this is exactly what one would expect.

So, the objection in question fails to capture the immediacy of moral failure the way the perceptual model does when 'understanding' is read narrowly; when 'understanding' is read widely, though, the objection fails to be an objection at all (much like reading 'judgment' widely enough dissolves the objection that we are talking about judgments when we talk about perceptions). This suffices, it is contended, for dealing with the initial objection.

26. This second approach is found in Aristotle, and recently in John McDowell. See, for example, McDowell, "Values and Secondary Quality."

27. Starkey, "The Category of Moral Perception," p. 95.

28. Cited in J. L. Mackie, *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 111.

29. For example, see William G. Lycan, *Judgement and Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 199–201.

30. The authors would like to thank John Collins, William Lycan, Neil Tennant, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.