

# Moral Phenomenology (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)

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In the philosophy of mind, the study of mental life has tended to focus on three central aspects of mental states: their representational content, their functional role, and their phenomenal character. The representational content of a mental state is what the state represents, what it is about; its functional role is the causal role it plays within the functional organization of the subject's overall psychology; its phenomenal character is the experiential or subjective quality that goes with what it is like, from the inside, to be in it. The study of this third aspect of mental life is known as *phenomenology*. Thus, moral phenomenology is the study of the experiential dimension of our moral inner life – of the phenomenal character of moral mental states.

(The term “moral phenomenology” is used sometimes to denote a subject and sometimes to denote a subject matter. Here, I will reserve it for the subject, and use “moral experience” to denote the subject matter. Under this terminological regime, moral phenomenology is the dedicated study of moral experience.)

Many different questions arise within moral phenomenology, but perhaps they can be profitably filed under three headings. The first concerns the *scope* of moral experience: How much of our moral mental life is experiential? That is, which moral mental states have a phenomenal character? The second concerns the *nature* of moral experience: What *is* it like to undergo the various kinds of moral experience we have? What is the proper phenomenological analysis of each type of moral experience? The third concerns the theoretical *effect* of moral experience: How might our understanding of moral experience impact central debates in moral philosophy? That is, what are the

consequences of phenomenological “results” on larger ethical and metaethical questions? We will now consider each of these types of question.

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In considering the scope of moral experience, the least controversial varieties will involve areas of mental life that both are uncontroversially moral and clearly have an experiential dimension. Moral emotions (see EMOTION) are a case in point: the feeling of indignation at a certain injustice is clearly a moral mental state and has a characteristic phenomenal character. The same holds for certain varieties of respect, compassion, gratitude, contempt, (out)rage, guilt, and other moral emotions. Likewise, there are certain agentive or conative mental states that clearly appear both moral and experiential – conscious moral desire (see DESIRE) and moral decision come to mind.

More controversial forms of moral experience are moral perception (see PERCEPTION, MORAL) and moral judgment or belief. They are controversial for different reasons: it is clear that perception has a phenomenal character, but controversial that any perception is genuinely moral; by contrast, it is clear that some judgments/beliefs are genuinely moral, but less clear that judgments or beliefs have phenomenal character. Thus, admitting the existence of these kinds of moral experience involves certain substantive commitments. Sensibility theorists (McDowell 1979; see SENSIBILITY THEORY), for example, will argue that there is a kind of perception which is genuinely moral, and therefore that some moral experience is perceptual. Some proponents of cognitive phenomenology (Strawson 1994; Pitt 2004) – philosophers who argue that purely cognitive mental states do sometimes exhibit a proprietary type of phenomenal character – could argue that moral judgments/beliefs have a distinctive phenomenal character, and therefore qualify as a type of moral experience.

An expansive moral phenomenology would admit not only moral emotion and agency, but also moral perception and cognition (judgments/beliefs), and perhaps even more (e.g., sui generis moral intuition), as forms of moral experience. A more timid moral phenomenology would accept only moral emotion and agency, or perhaps even less (e.g., denying moral agency is experiential), as genuine moral experience. How the question of the scope of moral experience is settled will depend partly on empirical results of appropriate inquiry, but also on conceptual and methodological

issues concerning what it takes for something to qualify as “experiential” or “phenomenal,” and how we ought to cull and analyze phenomenological data.

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Let us move on, then, to the question of the *nature* of moral experience. Here, the phenomenological investigation can be pursued at two levels, global and local. Global moral phenomenology concerns the extrinsic relations that episodes of moral experience bear to each other and to nonexperiential mental states: (i) how much of our stream of consciousness is taken up by moral experience, (ii) which types of moral experience (emotional, cognitive, etc.) are more dominant in our moral life, (iii) whether there is a phenomenal feature which is common and peculiar to moral experiences, and which can thus serve as the “phenomenal signature” of moral experience, etc. Local moral phenomenology concerns the internal phenomenal character and structure of specific episodes of moral experience: (i) what the salient phenomenal characteristics of this or that moral experience are, (ii) whether the phenomenal character of prototypical episodes of moral experience is more cognitive or more conative in nature, (iii) whether any moral experiences phenomenally present themselves as having objective pretensions, etc. Although some “global” questions have been the subject of heated debate – in particular, the question of whether moral mental states have any phenomenal character in common (see Gill 2008, Sinnott-Armstrong 2008) – it is on the “local” questions that moral phenomenologists have tended to focus. In particular, many moral philosophers in the phenomenological tradition have offered analyses of certain moral experiences that they took to be *foundational* in our conscious life as morally aware beings.

Already Franz Brentano, the “grandfather” of the phenomenological movement, offered a detailed account of an experience he considered the Archimedean point of our moral understanding of reality (see BRENTANO, FRANZ). The account proceeds by a series of three “phenomenal contrasts,” whereby a subtle experiential feature is brought into introspective relief by contrasting conscious states that feature it with ones that do not (Brentano 1889, §27). Suppose we meet extraterrestrials who turn out to have two peculiarities. First, they frown on the use of toothpaste and commend instead the use of mud-and-earthworm paste for the brushing of teeth; second, they frown on the deliberate inducement of joy in others and commend rather the

deliberate inducement of suffering. Three contrasts are highlighted by Brentano. First, when we contemplate “side by side” our preferences and theirs when it comes to means of tooth-brushing, we are clearly aware of a strong and incontrovertible attachment to our own preferences. Second, when we do the same with respect to our distribution of commendation and condemnation of deliberate inducement of joy and suffering in others, we again experience a strong and incontrovertible preference for our own distribution. Third, and crucially, when we contrast our preference for our own approach to tooth-brushing with our preference for our own approach to others’ joy and suffering, we notice an experiential feature present in the latter but not the former: the inducement of joy in others is experienced as *inherently and self-evidently worthy* of approval, and the deliberate inducement of suffering as *inherently and self-evidently worthy* of disapproval, whereas this experience of inherent and self-evident meriting is absent for tooth-brushing. For Brentano, it is through this experience of things inherently and self-evidently meriting our approval or disapproval that we obtain our original grasp on the realm of moral value.

Brentano’s most prominent student, Edmund Husserl, engaged in important phenomenological analyses of intersubjectivity, but many of his students made even more central contributions to moral phenomenology (see HUSSERL, EDMUND). Edith Stein, for example, argued that our moral relationship to the world is based on a *sui generis* affective experience of other people as not just intentional objects populating our own phenomenal world, but as constituting independent centers of intentional directedness onto a numerically distinct phenomenal world (Stein 1917). Correctly characterizing the way in which the other’s inner life is present to our mind in this kind of experience, which Stein calls empathy, requires some care (see EMPATHY). On the one hand, when we see a person writhing in pain before us, her pain is present to our mind in a direct and unmediated way characteristic of perceptual encounter; it is not present in the form of a mere theoretical posit we reach through rational inference from perceived behavior. On the other hand, we clearly do not experience this person’s suffering the way we experience our own. Rather, Stein likens this to the perceptual experience of the backside of a material object. When we see a car driving by, we experience it as a complete, three-dimensional car, not as a two-dimensional car-surface facing us. The unseen part of the car is somehow built into our perceptual experience of the car. The suffering of another is given to us in the same way: it shows

up in the direct perceptual experience of the other as a whole person, despite being “unseen” the way the car’s backside is unseen.

A crucial figure in linking the phenomenological tradition with English-speaking moral philosophy is Maurice Mandelbaum, whose book *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (Mandelbaum 1955) played an important role in igniting interest in the phenomenal character of moral experience among analytic philosophers (see Horgan and Timmons 2008a, 2008b). According to Mandelbaum, the prototypical moral experience is that of a “direct moral judgment,” where one is confronted with a morally pregnant situation calling on one to react. Such experiences, claims Mandelbaum, involve a phenomenal character of *felt demand*. Mandelbaum describes this phenomenal character as a sort of force, which like every force has a *source* and a *direction*: the source is always experienced as external to us, and the direction always as pointed at us.

Mandelbaum’s analysis casts the phenomenal character of moral experience as having a straightforward objectivist purport. According to Horgan and Timmons (2008b), however, moral experience is a little subtler than this. They suggest that moral experience has an objective purport only in a limited sense. It has objective purport inasmuch as it has a belief-ish phenomenal character, and moreover phenomenally presents itself as impartial, nonarbitrary, and reason-based. However, it does not necessarily present itself phenomenally as answerable to external, mind-independent facts, and to that extent it does not have a more robust objectivist or realist purport. By this Horgan and Timmons do not mean that moral experience presents itself to introspection as unanswerable to mind-independent moral facts; rather, they claim that introspection seems silent on the matter, and this means that there is no introspective *evidence* for objective purport in moral experience (Horgan and Timmons 2007).

Both Mandelbaum and Horgan and Tienson highlight the belief-ish or judgment-like phenomenal character of moral experience. Brentano and Stein, in contrast, construe the crucial experience as rather affective or emotion-like. Thus the theme of whether moral life lies fundamentally in emotion or in reason, which theme recurs throughout moral philosophy, has its phenomenological manifestation as well. One possible view is that there are two kinds of moral experience, one essentially emotional and the other essentially cognitive. One can consciously intellectually judge that genocide is wrong,

and one can feel emotionally indignant about genocide. Both conscious states morally evaluate genocide (Kriegel 2012). Arguably, however, they do so very differently: in the judgment that conscious genocide is wrong, the experienced wrongness is part of *what* one experiences, so the evaluation is implicated in the *content* of one's conscious state; in the felt indignation about genocide, the experienced wrongness is an aspect of *how* one experiences, so that the evaluation is built into the very attitude characteristic of indignation. We might say that the judgment experientially represents genocide-as-wrong, whereas the indignation experientially represents-as-wrong genocide (see Kriegel 2015). This gives a certain fundamentality to emotional moral experiences, since their moral evaluation is essential to the very type of conscious state they are (whereas moral judgments are seen to be simply the subset of judgments that happen to have a moral proposition for their content).

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Hopefully this small selection of phenomenological claims and analyses in the extant literature manages to give a flavor of the kind of research one might designate as "moral phenomenology." Let us turn, then, to the question of the theoretical impact and relevance of moral phenomenology. Here too, it would be useful to distinguish two levels of relevance: to first-order normative ethics and to metaethics. On the one hand, moral phenomenology can importantly inform debates within and among consequentialist (see CONSEQUENTIALISM), deontological (see DEONTOLOGY), and virtue-ethical (see VIRTUE ETHICS) ethical frameworks. On the other hand, it can also inform debates between cognitivism and expressivism, realism (see REALISM, MORAL) and anti-realism, etc.

To start, consider that there is a potential central role for moral phenomenology in each of the major (first-order) ethical theories. Thus, in the most straightforward version of consequentialism, the right action is identified with the action which would be instrumental in bringing about the maximum non-instrumental/intrinsic goodness (and/or the minimum non-instrumental/intrinsic badness) in the world. And while many things feature in lists of non-instrumental goods and evils, pleasure and pain show up on the list almost universally. The idea is that whatever instrumental value pleasure might have, other things being equal it is also good for its own sake (see PLEASURE). Observe, now, that what makes pleasure have "positive" value and pain "negative"

value is presumably their phenomenal character – it is unclear what (non-instrumental) reason there might be to avoid inducing non-experienced pain (if such there be). We can therefore expect that phenomenological analysis of pleasure, pain, and other affectively valenced conscious states (e.g., feeling content, feeling embarrassed) would bear on the question of which mental states are non-instrumentally or intrinsically valuable.

Consider next the first version of deontological ethical theory to come to mind, the categorical-imperative-centered Kantian ethics (see CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; KANT, IMMANUEL). In its most intuitive formulation – the “humanity formula” – the categorical imperative calls on us to treat humanity, whether ours or others’, always also as an end in itself and never merely as a means. What this comes to depends on what is involved in treating someone as an end. Note that the formula does not prohibit treating others as means, only treating them as *mere* means, and that this implies that it is possible to treat someone simultaneously as an end and as a means. This in turn entails that it is impossible to analyze treating someone as an end purely negatively, in terms of avoiding treating them as a means. Some positive characterization of treating as an end is called for. This positive characterization will likely address both the functional role and the phenomenal character of the mental states of a moral agent who treats someone as an end. More specifically, it is unlikely that the state that grounds treating someone as an end – perhaps a kind of respect – could be fully characterized without any phenomenological remarks on the agent’s experience while treating a patient as an end (see RESPECT). In other words, the phenomenology of Kantian respect for persons is likely crucial for understanding Kant’s humanity formula (see Kriegel and Timmons forthcoming).

Finally, consider the classical form of virtue ethics, as developed in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (see ARISTOTLE). Here the central maxim can be captured in the principle that we ought to do the right thing “to the right person, at the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way” (1109a27-9). Compare giving a generous handout to a homeless person with contempt versus with compassion in one’s heart. And compare further the generously acting person who *believes* that homeless people are her equal but cannot stop feeling a sense of superiority toward them versus the person who *feels* that homeless people are her equal. The virtuous agent does not only *do* the right thing, and does not only *believe* the right thing, but

also *feels* the right way. This raises the question of what the virtuous agent feels – what is the distinctive phenomenal character of what she experiences as she acts. Annas (2008) argues that the phenomenology of virtue is the phenomenology of *flow*, where the agent experiences no inner resistance to, and no need for effort in, performing the right action. Other views of the matter are certainly possible, but it is clear that a phenomenological investigation into the character and structure of the experience of virtuous agency ought to be part of the program of virtue ethics.

As for the relevance of moral phenomenology to metaethics, there is a long tradition of invoking phenomenological considerations in the context of the debate over moral realism. One traditional argument for realism is that moral experience presents itself as answering to a realm of mind-independent moral facts, and so we would be under massive illusion if there were no such realm. Although some philosophers are willing to bite the bullet and adopt a so-called error theory (Mackie 1977; see [ERROR THEORY](#)), most consider that this is a price very much worth avoiding. To avoid paying it, one could argue either (i) that the inference from the character of moral experience to the reality of such moral facts is problematic, or (ii) that moral experience does not in fact present itself as answering to moral facts in the way realists have claimed (Loeb 2007). This latter strategy requires engaging in some moral phenomenology. The result of this engagement thus directly affects the cases for moral realism and irrealism.

Consider next the debate over cognitivism. Perhaps the most central argument for cognitivism relies on the Frege–Geach observation (see [FREGE–GEACH OBJECTION](#)) that moral judgments have an inferential role characteristic of the cognitive (Geach 1960). Arguably, however, the intuitive pull of cognitivism owes much to the introspective impression that moral mental states *feel* cognitive, or belief-like (Horgan and Timmons 2007). This is arguably why technical accommodations of the Frege–Geach problem by non-cognitivists (e.g., Gibbard 2003) do not undo the appeal of cognitivism. Thus, it would seem that the battle over the respective merits of cognitivism and non-cognitivism must be fought on at least two fronts: the Frege–Geach problem and the phenomenology of moral experience.

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In conclusion, the area of moral phenomenology is of unmistakable relevance to the most central issues of moral philosophy, and is relatively wide open in terms of the



number of issues within it that remain underexplored, concerning the scope and nature of various types of moral experience. Its pursuit has been limited and disparate until very recently, perhaps due to the sense of intractability that attached to phenomenology in general. Yet, in relevant areas of philosophy of mind and cognitive science, this initial sense of intractability has ceased to be paralyzing some time ago. It can therefore be expected with some justification that a parallel development will enhance research in moral phenomenology over the coming years and decades.

**See also:** ARISTOTLE; BRENTANO, FRANZ; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; CONSEQUENTIALISM; DEONTOLOGY; DESIRE; EMOTION; ERROR THEORY; FREGE–GEACH OBJECTION; HUSSERL, EDMUND; INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; KANT, IMMANUEL; NON-COGNITIVISM; PERCEPTION, MORAL; PLEASURE; REALISM, MORAL; RESPECT; SENSIBILITY THEORY; VIRTUE ETHICS

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