

**Robert Audi, *Moral Perception*, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 180, \$ 35.00, ISBN 9780691156484**

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Since 1930 when David Ross's *The Right and the Good* came out moral intuitionism became one of the most relevant and significant moral approaches. Robert Audi has played a prominent role in the development of a moderate Rossian-kind intuitionism, mostly with his *The Right in the Good* published in 2004. In continuity with his previous books *Moral Perception* is meant to be a further development of his intuitionist position with an analysis of how perception works in the moral domain. This work is divided into two parts that respectively try to answer the following questions: a) What is moral perception and how does it bring about moral knowledge? b) What is the relation between moral perceptions and intuitions, emotions and moral judgments? The answers to those questions aim at being a helpful investigation for moral epistemology, normative ethics and other philosophical fields in general.

The first chapter, the most complex one, deals with the epistemological problems of perception outside the ethical domain. Namely, the Author specifies perception's *epistemic authority* (its capacity to provide knowledge) and its area of application (whether it is relegated to a descriptive function or it is open even to a normative one). Answering to those questions requires to overcome a conception of perception as merely *sensory* (the role of the five senses and of proprioception), by conceiving perception in a *intellective* and *apprehensional* sense (p.9). In order to do that, Audi highlights a distinction among: *simple* perception (perceiving something), *attributive* perception (recognizing its properties) and *propositional* perception (seeing that this proposition is true, pp.9-10). His theory of perception is meant to have a casual relation between perceiving something and having an appropriate phenomenal representation of it (p.20). This means instantiating a set of properties of the object, which are seen out of at least one observable property (p.27) according to "an appropriate causal relation between its instantiating such properties and our phenomenal awareness of them" (p.28).

The second chapter applies and justifies perception, as stated above, within the ethical domain. Moral perception is not the mere perception of a moral phenomenon: "Seeing a deed that

*has moral properties – for instance the property of being wrong – does not entail seeing its wrongness”* (p.31). This book argues for the possibility of perceiving, for example, injustice by “*viewing soldiers shooting citizens who are peaceably criticizing their government”* (*ibidem*), rather than simply perceiving soldiers that are acting in a way that we then consider *unjust*. The way we perceive moral properties is not like regular physical perception of objects, since no sensory phenomenal representation for them is possible. Nevertheless, phenomenal elements could play a role in it (p.33-34). We recognize, then, a difference between *perceptual* properties (strictly speaking, the sensory properties such as colors and shapes) and *perceptible* properties (such as wrongness, justice and obligatoriness); moral ones are of the second kind (p.35). Basically “[t]he senses can yield the base by which we see certain perceptible properties without their being on the same level as the perceptual properties pictured or mapped by the senses” (p.37). This allows for a conception of moral perception in which the perceiver feels a sense of connection between moral properties and non-moral properties that ground them (p.39). Nevertheless, it is very important to note that this process is non-inferential since the connection between the two kinds of properties is essentially granted by our capacity to *sense morally* what in our perception exceeds the mere sensorial data: “*This is not because moral properties are sensory – they are not – but because there is a kind of perceptual experience that appropriately incorporates the properties that ground the moral property that we sense. Perceptibility is not exhausted by perceptuality”* (pp.40-41). Given this account of moral perception, the third chapter continues by analyzing how this could lead us to moral knowledge in a non-inferential way. The author is aware of the fact that not all moral knowledge is acquired through perception, but just a part of it. We are able, in fact, to show inferentially that we know something, even when the premises are non-moral perceptions from which we *realize* some moral content. Nevertheless *showing* and *realizing* are not necessarily needed to know something. Moral knowledge through perception is more like a response to certain patterns that we morally sense, where inference is not needed to get knowledge (p.52). The relation between moral and non-moral properties, thus, is not *causal* and *inferential*, but rather *constitutive* and *epistemic*; moral perception is not *caused by* seeing a phenomenon, but it is

seeing it *in a moral way* (p.58, pp.61-62).

If, then, moral knowledge is achievable through moral perception, it can be seen as a possible ground to solve moral disagreement. In chapter 4 Audi states that disagreement of all kinds arises when the parties involved are not looking at the facts from the same perspective, what he calls *perspectival disparity* (p.74). On the other hand moral perception, under a condition of *epistemic parity*, will not make easy to resolve moral disagreement, but certainly can play a role in giving us a ground for this (p.75ff).

At this point Audi, from a moral intuitionistic point of view, shows the analogies between moral perception and moral intuition. First of all, the latter shares with perception the same objects, that is, moral concepts and properties. Moral knowledge, as showed in the previous chapters, can be instantiated by morally perceptible base and moral properties. At the same time we can rely on an intuitive moral responsiveness to the very same properties. Second, they both provide moral knowledge non-inferentially and immediately (not in a chronological sense). Intuitions, for example, may supervene upon reflection when we decide whether to cease life support for our terminally ill father. We might spend quite some time reflecting on the matter and then we realize we have a sort of impression on what it is the right thing to be done. This, far from being an inferential way of reasoning, underlines how intuitions are not necessarily gut responses (p.84). Moreover, this does not lead to the fact that moral beliefs so acquired cannot be then defended out of inference from premises since, again, *knowing* something does not require *showing* it. An intuition can be justified by an inference, but it does not essentially rely on it. It is not surprising here that we can intuitively see how the author has drawn inspiration from his previous works and his well-know intuitionistic position, in order to outline a conception of moral perception that fits a view where moral knowledge is mostly achieved non-inferentially both by intuition and perception. According to this, moral principles, such as the categorical imperative or the principle of utility, play a poor role in decision making in our everyday lives, and even if they turn out to be useful in some occasions, they would be meaningless if their results were not confirmed by our moral intuitions or moral perceptions (pp.100-101).

Such a view of morality, as not necessarily principle-driven,

allows for an interesting comparison with the way aesthetics works. The fifth chapter, in fact, points out how many of the points at issue are shared by both fields: “[t]here is aesthetic perception, as opposed to mere perception of an aesthetic object, just as there is moral perception, as opposed to mere perception of a moral phenomenon; there is aesthetic intuition, just as there is moral intuition; and, in aesthetic as in ethics, we find aesthetic disagreements that, even more than moral disagreements, challenge the view that normative domains have objective standards” (p.103). In sum, aesthetic experience, like moral experience, is *experiential*, that is, a response to something that is somehow experienced. In other words, they are direct responses to *base properties* that, according to a *consequential relation*, ground the truth of the *normative properties*, of which the known propositions are bearers (p.107). “*Consequentiality is a stronger relation than supervenience in being a determination relation*” (p.108). This way of proceeding to knowledge through perception and intuition is common both to morality and aesthetics. Moreover, neither within the former nor within the latter knowledge can be achievable only by dependence upon inference from a-priori-knowable principles (p.120).

Clearly, moral knowledge is the guideline of the whole work, which underlines how moral perception plays here a major role. However, it is far from being the only way to it, reflection, for example, could be another option. Moral intuition may also arise out of emotions, which can play a role in moral matters too (p.121). The relation between intuitions and emotions is the focus of the sixth chapter. First of all, we need to underline that emotions, differently from intuitions, are not truth-valued, as they can be misleading or *ill-grounded* (p.123). Secondly, intuitions are not necessarily *motivational* (they give a motivation to act accordingly), emotions instead are such (p.124). Nevertheless, even if there is a marked distinction between the two, the cognitive component of an emotion can be constituted by an intuition (p.133). If we refer to moral perception, we can see how intuitions could arise *in* moral perception, *with* moral perception and *from* moral perception. “*In all three cases, the kind of intuitive knowledge that perception can yield may produce a cognition central in an emotion [...]*” (p.134). Intuiting unfairness, for example, as we perceive an injustice, may then lead to feel a sense of

indignation. In this way emotions might even have an *evidential role* as they are a sort of rational response that strengthens or more readily supports a cognition. However emotions cannot have *evidential autonomy*, that is providing knowledge independently from perception and intuition.

There are many benefits we can get from moral emotions in Normative Ethics as well (ch.7). If we take the eight *prima facie* duties assumed by the Rossian intuitionistic account, we can see how different kinds of emotion can be respectively applied to all of them, highlighting the violation or the conformity with what the principles require (pp.146-153). Emotions so understood can work as an acknowledgement of one's conduct according to one's duties. Moreover, they may occur, as well as intuitions, not only as a result of moral perception, but also as arisen from *moral imagination*. Deliberation and moral judgment may be supported by the role of imagination *within* a moral sphere, which is able to inspire the same outcomes (emotions, intuitions) as we were perceiving the facts at issue. Even more interestingly, imagination is *creative*, since, unlike perception, it does not have to give an account of reality. Moral imagination is limitlessly combinatory, dynamic and readily responsive and so are emotions and intuitions inspired by it, which ultimately will lead us to moral judgments.

The roles of intuitions, emotions, imagination and mostly of moral perception, as Robert Audi argues, represent a reliable improvement for moral philosophy. In showing this the author deals with some of the major issues of the contemporary debate, such as the possibility of objectivity in ethics and the role of emotions in moral judgment. Certainly his position is not free from some possible critiques and further refinement, but what we can get from it is the way we access the raw materials of ethics, and how we can handle them with the tools that make moral philosophy possible.

Even if background knowledge of Audi's position is not necessary for a general understanding of the book, a full insight of the most complex parts (mostly chs.1, 4, 7) will require some previous readings of his works. Thanks to the epistemological depth and the direct access to the major topics of the contemporary debate, this book enriches Audi's philosophy in a way that reasonably makes him one of the most influential moral philosophers of our time.

**Bibliography**

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