

Perceiving Morality with Preston Werner

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Christiane: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Can you see goodness with your eyes? Can you feel morality in your heart? The philosopher Preston Werner thinks so. He defends an idea called moral perception, which means that just like you're able to see or feel things like the color of an orange or the softness of a sweater, you're also able to perceive or feel morality. Some philosophers argue that perceiving morality is a key part of how we make moral judgments about situations. On today's episode, Preston explains to me that humans can through their eyes, ears, or hearts perceive morality. He also explains why it matters.

Preston Werner: It seems like our knowledge of moral facts is very direct. And it seems like people who have had more experience with moral situations tend to be able to tell us interesting moral information that someone who doesn't have as much experience does. And that seems to tell in favor of a model of moral knowledge, where it's about interacting with the world, rather than about sitting in a chair and thinking really hard.

Christiane: Stay tuned to learn more about moral perception with the philosopher Preston Werner on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: The textbook definition of moral perception goes something like this: through our sense organs, we can perceive morality. So say you're walking down the street and you round a corner and you see a kid torturing a cat. And in case you are wondering, yes, the textbook definition always includes this poor tortured cat, which unfortunately means we're gonna have to return to it again throughout the episode. Scholars who defend moral perception argue that you don't really need to reason through whether what you're seeing is good or bad. You just see and hear the cat suffering and perceive that it's bad. That's basically the idea behind moral perception, that you can sense the goodness or the badness in given situations. There are a lot of people who are skeptical of this idea. And as you'll hear in my conversation with the philosopher Preston Werner, I need some convincing to believe that moral perception might be true, but I also need to be convinced about why it matters.

Anyway, Preston explained that moral perception is a way of figuring out morality. That's very much grounded in our experience of the world and far from being some concept that's isolated from everyday life. It actually has important connections to current events. When I spoke with

Preston about moral perception, it ended up being more like a dialogue than a traditional interview. Talking with him helped me form an understanding of just what moral perception is and why it's important. I'm hoping that by sharing our dialogue, it might help you all understand this idea better too. So I gave you a pretty simplistic definition of moral perception: that you can perceive or sense moral facts like what's right and wrong and good and bad in some situations. Let's dive into the conversation beginning with an expansion on the definition from Preston.

Preston Werner: Moral perception is really roughly, it's just a view that our access to moral knowledge is more like our access to facts about things like the fact there's a table in the room, or the fact there's a computer sitting on my lap and stuff like that. There's an old debate in philosophy about whether our moral knowledge is more like our knowledge of say mathematics, where you just sort of think through things, you can sit back in your armchair and just think about some complicated calculation and figure things out. Or whether moral knowledge is more like our knowledge of beauty or aesthetic properties like that, where you go out and experience things and you can experience information that is not just morally relevant, but actually moral itself.

Christiane: The argument is that you can see with your eyes that things are bad. You could hear with your ears that things are bad. Maybe you could even smell that things are morally bad. I don't know what that would smell like. Um, but that's the idea, right? That it's like bodily perceptual senses

Preston Werner: For me, the answer to that is yes, but there's a kind of another strand of people who count themselves as moral perceptualists who think we can perceive things being good or bad, not purely through our sense, organs like eyes and ears, but through our emotional responses to what we take in from our sense organs. And then they have this view that emotions are also perceptual states, but they're just perceptual states of a special kind. So I don't think exactly that, although like my view is very similar to that because I think that although we can literally see and hear badness and goodness, it's only because we have emotional attunement that affects our perceptual processing.

Christiane: That actually helps me a lot. When I was thinking about perception, I was getting lost in the idea of perception itself and like light waves hitting your eyes or sound waves hitting your ears and then that somehow translates into moral knowledge. And you're saying that there is something emotional there.

Preston Werner: Yes. Yeah, exactly. A very common objection that people who don't like perceptualism give to the view is, well, badness doesn't look like anything. You know, like an apple looks like something, but badness doesn't look like anything. I think the natural response to that is to say that badness can look a certain way. It's just that your perceptual processes need external emotional input. Badness looks kind of like the way that danger feels when you feel fear. It's because there's something dangerous. And I think that badness is similar. It's a perceptual empathetic response.

Christiane: That actually, that's a really nice analogy for me, because I think part of my problem with moral perception is that it always seemed like - I think the example everybody gives is like, you turn around the you're walking around the corner and you see somebody burning a cat and you just know, you perceive that that's bad. Right. You just know that it's bad. That's and I guess I was, I was worried about like, well, what if you turn the corner and you see like a lion ripping its prey apart mm-hmm, <affirmative>, that's causing suffering in the same way, but we wouldn't necessarily call that bad. And so in the same way, danger, there are things that make you feel fear, but they aren't necessarily dangerous, like you could be wrong.

Preston Werner: Yeah. If I'm afraid of heights, I might feel fear when I'm not in danger. Like if I'm standing at the edge of a cliff, but there's like a fence there, whereas someone who's not afraid of heights, they're totally fine. And so you can say, well, what's going on here? Like one person is perceiving the situation as dangerous, one person is not. And there's complicated issues like our emotional dispositions and things. And I think the same thing is true in the moral case, so we can have mistakes in moral perceptions. And in fact, I think it's pretty pervasive. And that's what explains like all sorts of moral disagreements with people. People can look at the same situation and one person can see it as really morally problematic and another person can see it as not problematic at all.

Christiane: Yeah. You can have five different people walk into a steak restaurant and all five people will have different moral. If, you know, if moral perception is a true thing, like they'll all have different moral perceptions. And so it's like, well, who's right. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, you know, like the vegetarian, the person who thinks it's unhealthy. And so they're doing a bad thing or the person who doesn't feel anything at all, and they're excited to eat a steak.

Preston Werner: I think it'd be really nice if the perceptualist had some test or something to determine who was right and who was wrong in a situation like that. But I think unfortunately, uh, <laugh>, we're not in a situation to figure that out just because of the way that morality works. There's no like easy empirical test for it. And so the best we can do is kind of ask people whether they're in other situations, they're good at responding. If they have experience and information about the other morally relevant facts. And I think sometimes that will help us clear the way for who is more likely to get it right, and who is not. But I don't think it will help totally resolve. I think there's going to remain some fundamental disagreements.

Christiane: So you could have moral perception kind of work on its own, but in a lot of cases, it's gonna work with other moral facts.

Preston Werner: I, this is a very philosopher-y thing to say, but I think it depends on what you mean by work on its own. So like, it will depend on lots of other background things like your previous experience and in some cases your previous beliefs. But yeah, I guess the short answer, the really short answer to your question is yes,

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Christiane: Preston and I have covered a lot at this point in the conversation. He's helped me better understand the idea of moral perception by comparing it to a feeling like danger. If you're running and you come to the edge of a cliff, you don't need to do a lot of thinking to know you're in danger. Similarly, if you perceive or sense that something is morally wrong, you don't need to sit in your armchair and think about it like a math problem. In the next part of our discussion, I brought up one of the most common objections to the idea of moral perception. Skeptics argue that even though it may seem like you can just perceive goodness or badness without really thinking about it, there's always some kind of prior knowledge that you're working with. So if you turn the corner and see someone torturing a cat and perceive that it's immoral, while it may seem kind of automatic, your brain is actually very quickly working through all of your knowledge of what makes something good or bad and helping you see the badness in this situation, you see the cat, you hear the cat crying out in pain, but the reason you decide it's bad is because you had a previous belief about the wrongness of torture, because your belief about the wrongness of torture didn't originally come from seeing or hearing this couldn't be a case of moral perception.

So we're gonna pick up our conversation again. I've just brought up the fact that I kind of agree with this common objection to moral perception. I told Preston that I thought that anytime I perceive anything, I'm always working with things I had learned about the world. Even if it happened so fast, I didn't notice it. To me, learning and knowledge always come before perception. He gave me an example about learning to distinguish one type of animal from another to help us work through my objection.

Preston Werner: If you don't teach me the word cat, but there's like cats all over the place. And then other animals, I would suspect a child would be able to recognize that cats belong to some category that the other animals don't belong to. Whether or not they had a word for it.

Christiane: I guess to me, seeing 20 cats with 20 dogs is a learning experience. And so yes, if you just saw a cat for the first time with no prior of cat, you wouldn't know that it was cat or that it was different from another thing called dog.

Preston Werner: Yeah, I definitely agree. So, the idea is whether or not you're explicitly taught it, you learn it from a bunch of past experiences.

Christiane: Right. Yeah.

Preston Werner: Yeah. I agree with you about that. But I think that the learning in question is the ability of your perceptual systems to group certain inputs into certain categories.

Christiane: Oh, okay. So yeah, like I could learn things, but I'm learning them perceptually. So it still falls into a moral perception.

Preston Werner: Yeah. It's like your perceptual system is learning. Like, I totally agree with you, but if you think of the perceptual system as like one unit that is likely to make certain inferences or transitions, mm-hmm <affirmative>, but it's completely separated from the cognitive system, which makes its own inferences and forms, its own beliefs and things like that. As long as the moral stuff or the cat stuff is on the perceptual side, it's still gonna count as perceptually represented.

Christiane: Okay. All right. That, that makes, that makes sense.

Preston Werner: Right. Can't tell if you're actually convinced or if you just, uh, have given up on convincing me. <laugh>

Christiane: So even if you're learning, it's still prior knowledge, but it's prior knowledge that you gained through perception. So it still kind of counts as moral perception.

Preston Werner: Yeah. So as long as the learning is taking place totally on the perceptual side, it will still count as moral perception. And it's not just like a, a pure victory in the sense that it's like, well, it's still technically perceptual because it's in the perceptual system. So I think stuff that is perceptually learned is not rationally accessible, whereas stuff that is on the other side of things on the, you know, your beliefs are rationally accessible. So if the moral stuff is on the perceptual side, it's the epistemic given in the sense that it's going to default justify beliefs, unless we have some reason to think that it's wrong.

Christiane: Sorry. I'm trying to wrap my head around that. Um, yeah. Could you get me another round of that? I'm sorry.

Preston Werner: If you walk into a room and you see a table mm-hmm <affirmative> all right. You perceptually experience a table. You're not gonna be criticizable for just assuming that your perceptual experience is right. Unless you have some reason to believe you've been given drugs or something like that. Mm-hmm <affirmative> that would make you misperceive. Whereas if it's an inference, then you have to ask like, am I really justified in believing that tables look like this? And then you've gotta ask questions like, do I really have a good reason to believe that this is what tables look like? Whereas if it's on the perceptual side, I think there's not really any interesting questions to ask. It's just, this is the given. This is what the world gives to you. Here's a table. And so unless you have some special reason to think you've gone wrong, it's okay for you to believe there's a table.

Christiane: It's kind of, I mean, this it's more important than this, but it's a way to cut down on things like pedantry or needless arguing about things. You could just say like, that's wrong because I perceive that that creature is suffering and that's all you need to say.

Preston Werner: Yeah. In a normal context, you don't have to, you don't have to sit and question it. If you walk around the corner and see the cat being lit on fire and you just directly perceive that it's wrong, there's no need to like to sit there and conquer any skeptical doubts. Like, oh, what if I, what if it's not suffering? Or what if suffering isn't actually wrong or stuff like that. It's just, you're able to assume that the world is the way that it looks unless you've got some special reason to think you're wrong. And if part of the way the world looks is moral, then there's lots of moral things that you can just assume are the way they look, unless you've got some special reason to think you're wrong.

Christiane: Now, see, that's scary to me. <laugh> because I guess in cases...

Christiane: I'm gonna break in here with a quick definition. The reason Preston's idea was scary to me is because of something called implicit bias. An implicit bias is an unconscious bias that you might hold against someone because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or appearance. So as a white person who grew up in America, I probably have implicit biases against people of color. Even though I believe racism is wrong, my unconscious or implicit biases might not reflect that belief. So I told Preston that it worried me that we could just take our perceptions at face value because it seemed to me like my snap perceptions could be wrongly influenced by any implicit bias I might have. For example, I could walk up to my apartment door and see a person of color sitting on the stoop. If I have an implicit bias against people of color, I might perceive that something is "wrong." Even if that's not true at all.

Preston Werner: I'm really happy you brought this up. Cause this is actually like something that I really want to write about in the future. But I haven't been able to write about it yet. And I think it's a real good worry, like a deeper worry, about like this perceptual view. Like, well, look, we've got like implicit biases and they're, you know, functionally very similar to what I'm calling moral perception. And it seems like they are really problematic and, like, very pervasive. So notice what you, the way that you just described the phenomenon, you said you have good reason to think that these certain intuitions that you're having are racist and problematic because they're racist and you have to overcome them. That itself suggests that in this kind of case, you do have good reason to think that systematically you're going to have what you might call like moral illusions, where you feel like someone looks suspicious, but it's actually just that you've got these sort of like ingrained stereotypes that like black people are criminals or something like that. And so now you've got good reason to believe, like we have good empirical reason to believe that we have pervasively, problematic racist biases. And so now you can say, okay, I'm perceiving this person that's looking suspicious, but I know that this is just the sort of case where I wouldn't be very likely to get it right. By analogy, if you're trying to recognize someone in a very dark room, you might think, well, they sort of look like this person I know, but I know that my conditions for recognizing people are really bad because when it's dark your vision isn't very good. And so I'm going to like second, guess my initial hunch that this is my friend across the room or whatever. So I think the knowledge that we have these implicit biases is really important for keeping our moral perceptions in check because I think that the things that we perceive morally are partially the result of our emotional dispositions. When we live in a corrupt society,

like the United States where there's lots of racism, it corrupts our moral perceptions. And that's all the more reason why we should like make institutional changes because not only are they like deeply problematic for like all of these very practical institutional reasons, but they also like mess us up morally, they mess up our moral characters by making a subject to these moral illusions.

Christiane: I guess what started me on that worry was the fact that you said, isn't it nice about moral perception that we can just take things as givens <laugh>. Um, and so I guess I'm, I guess I'm wondering like, is that necessarily like a great thing about moral perception? Because I mean, for every, for every person who has realized, oh, I live in a corrupt society, my moral perceptions about people that are different than me are gonna be off. And so they need to always come under suspicion. There are, there are like 10 people who just think like, oh, I perceive that to be bad. Therefore it is bad and I'm not gonna question it.

Preston Werner: Yeah, certainly I don't mean to encourage complacency or anything like that. Notice that like there's a flip side to all of this too, right, which is, if you think about somebody who's suffering injustice, but you know, they're not like a trained ethicist or something, so they can't sit here and give you like a sound argument about why they're being treated unfairly. If you think about like selecting people at an airport for more security screening based on race, and people will say like, look, this is very dehumanizing. Like we're not being treated as equals. And this is very unfair. The sort of conservative pushback to that is, well, what's the big deal. There's this demand for, give me the argument about why this is wrong. And I think like the moral perceptual view says that the person who's in this situation where they're, you know, having to go through extra security screenings. And if they're not a trained ethicist, they're not gonna be able to give you a sound argument, but it sounds plausible to me for them to say, look, I can't tell you the story about why this feels so dehumanizing, but I feel it very strongly. And I think the perceptualist view says, look, they're in a privileged position with respect to whether what's happening is bad because they're the ones experiencing it. It's worrisome that like, there's gonna be people who are complacently distrusting of people of other races, but it's also the case that people in positions of disadvantage, of a lack of privilege, they're going to have an epistemic leg to stand on when they say you're treating us unjustly even if we can't give you like a complicated philosophical argument about why we're being treated unjustly, like we know it we're the ones experiencing it, so we're in the best position to understand that this is unfair or unjust.

Christiane: Why is it important for you to convince people that there is a thing that, that moral perception is real?

Preston Werner: <laugh> um, you mean like besides trying to get tenure, right?

Christiane: Yeah. <laugh> <laugh> I mean, <laugh> say your truth <laugh>

Preston Werner: No, no, certainly. Uh, certainly it's not, it's not, uh, <laugh>, I'm not that smart to be so strategic and think like, oh, well, no one defends this view, so I'm gonna do it. Uh, I kind of, uh, went on this search to see if anyone had defended this view and, um, saw lots of people philosophers very quickly and casually dismissing the view as really implausible or not worth taking very seriously. I thought the reasons aren't very good. I actually think...

Christiane: Some philosophers argue that how we perceive morality has to be somehow different than how we perceive things like tables and chairs, but moral perceptualists, like Preston argue that just as seeing, perceiving that there's a table in the room is a kind of knowledge, our moral perceptions can lead us to have moral knowledge. The reason Preston is so interested in moral perception is because it makes moral knowledge less mysterious. If we accept moral perception, then moral knowledge could be very much like the other kinds of knowledge we have about the world.

Preston Werner: Think about, well, what if our knowledge of moral facts is like our knowledge of tables and chairs? It seems like, uh, our knowledge of moral facts is very direct. It seems like it has like a strong phenomenology in the same way that perceptual experience does. And it seems like people who have had more experience with moral situations tend to be able to tell us interesting moral information that someone who doesn't have as much experience does. And that seems to tell in favor of a model of moral knowledge, where it's about interacting with the world, rather than about sitting in a chair and thinking really hard, which is like what the standard view seems to entail.

Christiane: If you wanna know more about Preston Werner and his work on moral perception, we'll have links to his articles and all of the other interesting stuff we mentioned on our show notes page for this episode at examiningethics.org. Are you a high school student who's into ethics or do you know a high school student who's into ethics? The Prindle Institute is now offering ethics scholarships here at DePauw University. If you wanna know more information about our ethics scholarships, shoot us an email at examiningethics@gmail.com. You can also find links to information about those ethics scholarships on our webpage, that's examiningethics.org. Remember to subscribe, to get new episodes of the show, wherever you get your podcasts, but regardless of where you subscribe, please be sure to rate us on apple podcasts. It helps us get new listeners, and it's still the best way to get our show out there. For updates about the podcast, interesting links and more follow us on Twitter at [ExaminingEthics](https://twitter.com/ExaminingEthics). We're also on Instagram at [examiningethicspodcast](https://www.instagram.com/examiningethicspodcast) and Facebook.

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