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Moral Disagreement and Audi's Account of Moral Intuitionism

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In *Moral Perception* Robert Audi lays out an intuitionist account of moral perception where a moral agent of the proper disposition can use emotion and intuition as a means of supporting or justifying knowledge concerning certain moral truths or propositions.^{lvii} This, however, opens Audi's account up to possible cases of moral disagreement, since emotion and intuition can vary from agent to agent regarding some particular moral propositions and, furthermore, neither agent would be better disposed to claim priority for his (justifying) emotion or intuition over that of the other agent. For this reason, I argue that agents in this intuitionist picture ought to remain epistemically agnostic towards any moral proposition that they and a relevant epistemic/moral peer actually disagree upon.

Section I: Emotion and Intuition as Justification of Moral Judgment

To begin, Audi claims that intuition and emotion can be a major factor in justifying claims regarding the truth of moral propositions. Ultimately, the process involves intuition and emotion leading us to make justified moral judgments.

Nesting justification in something like judgment, instead of merely belief, is very important for Audi's account. While both belief and judgment can cause an agent to be motivated to act, judgment is taken to be a better form of motivation for actions on Audi's account. Audi also considers judgment to be capable of bringing our beliefs into "sharper focus", presumably because judgment is typically considered to be a conscious inferential process which could make more salient the fact that an agent believes *p*. Lastly, judgment can and typically does include reflection, another means of bringing our beliefs into "sharper focus".^{lviii} For these reasons moral judgment, which typically entails belief formation one way or the other regarding the object of the judgment, is taken to be a central component of justification on this account.

It is evident on Audi's account that emotion and intuition are supposed to provide justification by going through this process of judgment and reflection, with the agent ultimately coming to judge the proposition in question as being either true or false. It is, however, much more difficult to see exactly how this is supposed to be accomplished. To be sure, there is no set way in which intuition and emotion justify moral judgment. Instead, there is a sort of general process by which intuition and emotion do so. I will attempt a brief sketch of this process below.

To start, we have some intuition or emotion regarding some moral proposition and its truth value. In some instances we may not feel as certain regarding some intuitions and emotions as we would others and because of this we refrain from making a decision one way or the other regarding that proposition. Instead, we reflect on the truth value of that proposition in order to come to some resolution of the matter. As Audi notes, reflection can provide adequate resolution, "...by evoking supporting or opposing intuitions, by leading us to a theoretical analysis, by providing premises that confirm or disconfirm the initial intuition, or in other ways."^{lix}

Section II: The Problem of Disagreement

Even if we accept Audi's account at face value we are still presented with the problem of disagreement. The problem is this: if emotion and intuition are means of coming to moral knowledge and, furthermore, emotion and intuition are taken to provide justification for the judgments we make, then how are we supposed to understand disagreement about (justified) moral judgments? Presumably, on an objectivist account such as Audi's, there will be a fact of the matter as to whether it is true or false that moral proposition *p* holds, but in what way are we justified in claiming that we know *p* if the basis for that justification is, in part, constitutive of the moral judgments we disagree upon? To be clear there are, of course, different kinds of disagreement we ought to consider.

The relevant kind of disagreement for this discussion is *content-specific disagreement*. Content-specific disagreement concerns disagreement regarding the content of a given proposition. Furthermore, content-specific disagreement can be categorized in the following way: as *propositional* or *attributive disagreement*. Propositional disagreement is a very common kind of disagreement characterized by at least two agents holding contrary views on a given proposition. For instance, I hold that *p* and my colleague holds that not *p*. Attributive disagreement, on the other hand, is characterized by at least two agents holding contrary views on any given proposition because they have attributed or predicated different qualities to the thing in question. There are additional kinds of disagreement, but for the purpose of this paper we will only be concerned with propositional disagreement.

There is also the issue of the relevant epistemic peer necessary for the sort of disagreement I am talking about to be a problem. If two individuals disagree, this by itself may not be enough for the disagreement to cause any real problem, since it could be the case that the two individuals disagreeing are not peers in the relevant sense. An example of this is when a child and the child's grandparent disagree regarding some moral proposition. The child's disagreement should not be enough to raise suspicion in the grandparent about his intuition regarding the moral proposition in question. For our purposes epistemic peers must at least be "... (a) equally rational and equally thoughtful and (b) have considered the same relevant evidence equally conscientiously."^{ix} This is generally called *epistemic parity*. In situations where we have epistemic parity and disagreement persists despite equally conscientious consideration of the other agent's position we have instances of problematic disagreement.

Section III: Audi's Solution to Propositional Disagreement

One possible solution Audi proposes is that we solve moral propositional disagreement through recourse to our moral perceptions. According to Audi "...moral perceptions, are responsive to the properties that determine moral truths, and moral emotions and often reflect such truths."^{xi} Surely this seems fine, but we are left with an issue even if we accept that moral perceptions sometimes latch on to moral truths.

Suppose two agents disagree on the truth value of a given proposition and attempt to solve the disagreement through moral perception. Moral perception on Audi's account is not similar to non-moral perception, in that moral perception concerns what Audi calls *perceptible* properties instead of *perceptual* properties. Perceptible properties are not all sensory and can be normative, while perceptual properties are all sensory and non-normative. Since perceptible properties are not all sensory this leaves open the possibility that some of them are sensory, but Audi does not seem to take this approach. Here is an example of how Audi speaks about perceiving injustice:

One might think that the phenomenal elements in perception properly so called must be sensory in the representational way that characterizes paradigms of seeing and some of

the other four ordinary senses. But why should we expect perception of injustice, which is a normative, *non-sensory* phenomenon, to be just like perception of color, shape, flavor, or sound, which are physical or in any case sensory and non-normative?^{lxii}

So, perception of a moral property is not properly sensory. Since this is the case disputants have nothing sensory to point to during a disagreement. On Audi's account we can have moral knowledge, but it seems much more difficult (nigh impossible) to provide proper justification for such claims when confronted with the relevant disagreement. Assuming the dispute is between genuine epistemic peers, appeal to perception will bring the disputants no closer to reaching an agreement, but instead pushes the issue back from moral judgments, to moral intuitions or emotions, further back to moral perceptions.

Another approach that Audi hints at is an appeal to moral expertise. In the final sections of his work *Moral Perception* Audi mentions that ethical theory and aesthetics are analogous in many ways. One of the ways in which ethical theory and aesthetics are analogous, Audi contends, lies in the conditions necessary to come to well-founded judgments. As criteria for the well-foundedness of judgments Audi invokes Hume's ideal aesthetic judge. The famous passage from *Of the Standard of Taste* explicates certain features:

[S]trong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, [which] can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.^{lxiii}

I think that this approach fails for the same reasons an appeal to perception fails to adjudicate disagreement. Suppose that two ethical judges disagree on the truth value of a given moral proposition. What recourse would these two have to solve their disagreement? Pointing to experience in comparison, intuitions, or emotions, which originally justified the judgment of the ethical judge, are all properly non-sensory and provide no way to properly adjudicate the matter if disagreement persists.

Section IV: Epistemic Agnosticism and Possible Problems

In Sarah McGrath's piece "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise" she mentions a passage from Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, which goes as follows:

[I]f I find any of my judgments, intuitive or inferential, in direct conflict with a judgment of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality.^{lxiv}

McGrath calls a belief that satisfies Sidgwick's condition **CONTROVERSIAL**.^{lxv} To be sure a **CONTROVERSIAL** belief involves two relevantly disposed agents engaging in (propositional) disagreement, such that if either agent has good reason to think the other is an epistemic or moral peer, then both suspend judgment. If the agents in question are not actually peers then a disputed belief is not **CONTROVERSIAL**. Recall the example I mentioned earlier of the child and the grandparent disagreeing regarding some moral proposition. This is an example of a disputed moral belief or judgment, but not a **CONTROVERSIAL** belief or judgment.

The judgments that are subject to propositional disagreement which I have been discussing are the ones which I believe suffer from being **CONTROVERSIAL** judgments. Furthermore, I think that if a judgment (or belief) is **CONTROVERSIAL** in this sense, then these judgments cannot amount to knowledge because one of the aspects of being a **CONTROVERSIAL** judgment, in my view, is that **CONTROVERSIAL** judgments do not provide justification for a belief simply because we have no good reason to place more credence on

our own intuitions than another agent's intuitions, given that the relevant kind of disagreement actually crops up.^{lxvi}

I think it is important to note that there are objections to this skeptical position regarding disagreement. I will canvas a few of them here. First, some philosophers question how this notion of epistemic agnosticism translates into areas other than morality. For instance, Russ Shafer-Landau argues that taking this position calls into question all of our beliefs or judgments regarding philosophical positions and factual claims as foundational as "There exists an external world." since, as Shafer-Landau interprets the skeptic, all it takes is one agent who vehemently disagrees with any other agent, which would then give the first agent grounds to claim that we should be epistemically agnostic towards whatever position is disagreed upon and remain so until disagreement is resolved.^{lxvii} Although this consequence seems appropriate considering the skeptic's charge, I am more inclined to think otherwise. As McGrath notes, with "...a more charitable construal of ... [the skeptic's] challenge, it is the fact that there is a substantial division of opinion with respect to controversial moral questions that undermines the possibility of knowing the answers to those questions."^{lxviii} So, it need not be the case that skepticism in the moral realm translates into any other realm, philosophical or otherwise, but this position need not preclude such skepticism either.^{lxix}

Second, Catherine Elgin maintains that we cannot voluntarily withhold (or make, for that matter) a given belief, since the act of forming a belief is not a voluntary one. Furthermore, Elgin accepts the notion that stating an agent ought to ϕ implies that that agent can in fact ϕ . If both of these premises are true, then this seems to be the strongest case against epistemic agnosticism or moderation, as Elgin calls it, since if it is the case that one cannot voluntarily form a belief or refrain from doing so, then it does not follow that one ought to.^{lxx}

Although this is the case it is far from clear as to whether or not one is precluded from remaining indifferent regarding any specific judgment or belief. Furthermore, Elgin's solution to the problem is to push the argument back to acceptance of a given proposition, which is voluntary, instead of belief in a given proposition, which she holds to be involuntary.

Elgin maintains that this position has general beneficial effects for the epistemology of disagreement literature, which includes a means of distinguishing between doxastic rationality and practical rationality. With regards to the problem I am attempting to address however, I think that one could merely accept Elgin's new dichotomy of acceptance as voluntary and belief as involuntary and build this into one's epistemic policy without significant problems.

The last objection I will mention to the sort of Sidgwickian epistemic agnosticism I am advocating for is an internalist Bayesian approach developed by Ralph Wedgwood. Wedgwood holds that, "...it is rational to have a "special sort" of trust in one's own intuitions, but it is not even possible to have the same sort of "trust" in the intuitions of others."^{lxxi} This claim rests on the idea that our own intuitions can guide us to belief formation, but the intuitions of others cannot have an exactly similar doxastic effect on us. If this is true, then it does not necessarily follow that in every case of disagreement we need to suspend judgment on the proposition we are disagreeing upon, but some of the time suspension of judgment is the rational thing to do. So far, this sounds consistent with the sort of epistemic agnosticism I am proposing. On my account you are not required to suspend judgment in every case of disagreement, but only in those cases where an actual epistemic peer is disagreeing with you. In this sense, Wedgwood's position seems to be congruent with mine.

What is markedly different about Wedgwood's account is that what it is rational to do is determined by our stock of conditional beliefs as well as some general epistemic principle, such as Jeffrey conditionalizing. Wedgwood argues that it is the case that agents can respond in a number of ways to disagreement. What is not clear from Wedgwood's argument is that either of the disputants are epistemic peers in any of the cases where the agents in question do

anything but suspend judgment. More work will need to be done on what constitutes a relevant epistemic peer, what doxastic effect another agent's belief has on us, and how background conditional beliefs play a role in belief formation.

Conclusion

I have argued that Audi's intuitionist account of moral perception is faced with a problem when the relevant epistemic peers engage in disagreement. First, I gave a brief sketch of Audi's position, including how intuition and emotion play a justificatory role in moral judgments.

Then I raised the issue of disagreement and provided a brief sketch of a possible solution. The solution I attempt to provide is Sidgwickian in nature, arguing that when presented with the relevant kind of disagreement both agents' ought to suspend judgment on the proposition in question. Lastly, I mentioned three objections to the sort of epistemic agnosticism I am proposing, none of which I consider to be fatal to this epistemic account.

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^{lvii} Audi, Robert. *Moral Perception*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Print. It may be important to note that this position assumes the existence of objective moral properties as a starting point and, as such, I will be assuming from the outset of this paper that moral properties do in fact exist in this manner.

^{lviii} *Ibid*, pp. 161-162

^{lix} *Ibid*, p. 165

^{lx} *Ibid*, p. 76

^{lxi} *Ibid*, p. 168

^{lxii} *Ibid*, pp. 36-37 [My italics]

^{lxiii} Hume, David. *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*. Ed. John W. Lenz. p. 17: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965. Print.

^{lxiv} Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. N.p.: The University of Chicago Press, 1874. 342. Print.

^{lxv} McGrath, Sarah. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau. 3rd ed. 2008. Print. (p. 91). The definition of this term is technical and not to be confused with a merely contested or taboo belief.

^{lxvi} As I understand it this position is either very similar to or has already been enunciated by Alan Gibbard in *Wise Choices, Apt Feeling* (pp. 176 – 181).

^{lxvii} Shafer-Landau, Russ. *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 108-09. Print.

^{lxviii} McGrath, “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise”. (p. 95)

^{lxix} In fact, I am inclined to side with Shafer-Landau regarding his claim that taking this sort of skeptical position should incline one to regard philosophical positions in general in the same manner, but this concession ought not to affect my current argument.

^{lxx} Elgin, Catherine Z. "Persistent Disagreement." *Disagreement*. Ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.

^{lxxi} Wedgwood, Ralph. "The Moral Evil Demons." *Disagreement*. Ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2010. 244. Print.