

Nussbaum on Moral Perception and the Priority of the Particular

Benjamin Visscher Hole IV

University of Washington
Department of Philosophy
Seattle, WA 98195

E-mail: bvhole@u.washington.edu 0026 nC 0 -1.126 TD()TjEMC P MICID 19 BDC 0le IV

Abstract

Martha Nussbaum's account of moral perception holds the thesis that we perceive moral particulars prior to ethical principles. First, I explain her account. Second, I present her with a dilemma: our perception of moral particulars is either non-inferential or it is

features depending on the given situation (*EN.II.6.1106b20-24*). For example, Milo, the wrestler must take his weight, physical training, relative size, and so on, into account when trying to determine how much to eat. Eating too much and eating too often are both excessive with respect to temperance. Eating too much involves an amount feature, while eating too often involves an occasion feature. Similarly, a person may be deficient by eating too little or too seldom.

But, moreover, Milo would have no principled way of criticizing Milo*'s perception of value. For all we know, moral perception may be deeply idiosyncratic.²² Milo may see white meat as valuable and Milo* may see it as disvaluable. Perhaps Milo* instead sees a donut as valuable. There is no *principled* way of determining value; *i.e.*, why the right thing for Milo* to eat is white meat and not the donut.

This problem here is exacerbated because we need principles in order to know where to attend our perceptual processes in the first place. If Milo is a temperate person, he will attend his perceptual processes to the right kinds of food. He needs to attend himself to the white meat and not the donut. But he needs a principle to determine which kinds of food are the right ones, in order to know where to look. Without some sort of principle, it is doubtful that Milo can know where to attend his vision. Indeed, we might think that the principle is prior to the particular for this very reason.

In addition, this kind of relativism undermines moral education. For example, Rachels brings up an analogous concern when it comes to cultural relativism: if cultural norms ground right action, it is unclear how and whether a culture can morally progress over time.²³ In the case of non-inferential moral perception: if moral particulars ground our moral deliberation, it is unclear how and whether we can learn to become virtuous agents over time. This kind of objection has been developed by Hastings Rashdall, who gives the following example:²⁴ Say we want to teach a child that stealing a flower from her neighbor's garden is wrong. We don't say that it is wrong in this particular case, depending on the situation – we say that stealing is wrong. Simply put, generalizing over particular cases seems to play an integral role in moral education. We think that a child needs some sort of generalized reason for why something is right or wrong in a particular situation, if she is to make the right decision in future particular situations. But if moral value is relative to each case of moral perception, then she has few resources to learn how to apply good moral deliberation across different cases.

Of course, I have not given a knock-down argument that intuitionism and relativism about moral value are themselves flawed. This is not necessarily a *reductio*. I have simply pointed to some familiar worries associated with these kinds of views, which gives us at least *prima facie* reason to reject a non-inferential account of moral perception over an inferential one.²⁵

²² Of course, Milo may have other resources for moral criticism that do not depend entirely on moral perception.

²³ Rachels, 700.

²⁴ See Rashdall, 82-83.

²⁵ Moreover, the rejection of general ethical principles itself leads to

perceiving the inference is not a far departure from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, which underlie Nussbaum's Aristotelian conception. So I want to briefly sketch how at least one principle based virtue ethical theory can accommodate such an account. Rosalind Hursthouse offers the following bi-conditional for right action:

An act is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.²⁸

This bi-conditional implies a virtue ethical principle, 'do what the virtuous person would do if she were in your same situation' which Hursthouse repeatedly calls a 'v-rule.' Of course, this bi-conditional (and its correlative v-rule) is not very helpful in itself because what a virtuous agent might do is thus far radically indeterminate. What the virtuous person does depends on her virtues. A particular virtue (or vice), V, generates a V-rule, 'do V.' So if the virtuous agent has the virtue of kindness, she would have the rule, 'do kind things.'

