

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION¹

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In this paper, I examine the relation between intentional action and morality from the perspective of their epistemology. In particular, I study the relation between the knowledge one has when one knows what one is doing in acting intentionally (*knowledge in acting*, for short) and the knowledge one has when one knows what one ought to do in the particular circumstances one finds oneself and not in general (*knowledge in the circumstances*, for short); and I focus on a problem concerning the role of perception in the Anscombean conception of knowledge in acting and the Murdochian conception of knowledge in the circumstances.²

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² For a brilliant discussion of the relevance of Murdoch's book *The Sovereignty of Good* to contemporary discussions see Setiya, K., *Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good*, (unpublished). For explicit appropriations of Murdoch's view in discussions of practical knowledge see Blum, L., "Moral Perception and Particularity", *Ethics*, 101/4 (1991), pp. 701-725; Bagnoli, C., "Moral Perception and Knowledge by Principles", in Hernandez, J. (ed.), *New Intuitionism*, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 89-106; Clarke, B., "Imagination and Politics in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy", *Philosophical Papers*, 35/3 (2006), pp. 387-411; McDowell, J. H., "What is the Content of an Intention in Action?", *Ratio*, 23/4 (2010), pp. 415-432. For discussions on Anscombe's book *Intention* and practical knowledge see for instance Moran, R., "Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge'", in Hyman, J. – Steward, H. (eds.), *Agency and Action (Royal Institute of Philosophy Suppl. 55)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; Falvey, K., "Knowledge in Intention", *Philosophical Studies*, 99/1 (2000), pp. 21-44; Setiya, K., "Knowledge of Intention", in Ford, A. – Hornsby, J. – Stoutland, F. (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011; McDowell, J. H., "How Receptive Knowledge relates to Practical Knowledge", (unpublished); etc. For more elaborate renderings of the Anscombean tradition in the philosophy of action see Thompson, M., *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008; Rödl, R., *Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007; etc.

Before I motivate the problem, a few introductory words are in order about the Anscombean conception of knowledge in acting and the Murdochian conception of knowledge in the circumstances. On certain so-called neo-Aristotelian accounts,³ such as the one Murdoch lays out in her book *The Sovereignty of the Good* and her paper *Vision and Choice in Morality*,⁴ knowledge in the circumstances is grounded in a certain sort of perception. Say I'm on the phone with an old friend, Mark, who is too chatty for my taste but who happens to be going through a rough phase in his life. And now say someone sees that I haven't uttered a word for over an hour and asks, *Why don't you just hang up the phone on him?* And I reply, *I can't hang up the phone on him now, I can hear that he's vulnerable.* The thought is simple. Knowledge in the circumstances is not the knowledge of what one ought to do in general; for instance the knowledge that one ought not to hang up the phone on one's friends. In our example, knowledge in the circumstances is the knowledge I have of not hanging up the phone on Mark as what I ought to do *right here, right now*. And now the neo-Aristotelian twist is that I know this because I hear that Mark is vulnerable; or else that this knowledge of mine is grounded in my perception of Mark's vulnerability. To put it more formally, my knowledge of not hanging up the phone on Mark counts as my knowledge of what I ought to do in the circumstances in virtue of my perception of Mark's vulnerability. From now on I will be calling the perception that is taken to constitute the ground of knowledge in the circumstances *moral perception*.

Now one might think that knowledge in acting is also grounded in perception, because an intentional action is also a happening and hence

³ See for instance McDowell, J. H., "Virtue and reason", in McDowell, J. H., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979; McNaughton, D. A. – Rawling, P., "Unprincipled Ethics", in Hooker, B. – Little, M. O. (eds.), *Moral Particularism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 256-75; Little, M., "Moral Generalities Revisited", in Hooker, B. and Little, M. O. (eds.), *Moral Particularism*, pp. 276-304; Lance, M. – Little, M., "Defending Moral Particularism", in Dreier, J. (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 305-321; Dancy, J., *Ethics without Principles*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004; Nussbaum, M., *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; etc.

⁴ Murdoch, I., *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970; Murdoch, I., "Vision and Choice in Morality", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume, 30 (1956), pp. 32-58.

an observable thing. Say that I'm cutting basil because I'm making pesto. And now say that someone walks into the kitchen and upon seeing me at the cutting board asks: *What are you doing there?* And I reply, *I'm cutting basil because I'm making pesto.* Now, on this line of thought, one might say that I know *what I am doing* by observing what is happening in the world as a result of my intending or trying (or by observing what is happening in the world and having introspective knowledge of what I intend or try to do). In other words, one might say that this knowledge, knowledge in acting, is a case of common or garden observational knowledge. But Anscombe claims in her *Intention*⁵ that the topic of intentional action is non-circularly captured by specifying the agent's *distinctive* knowledge of what she is doing when she is acting intentionally (knowledge in acting). And, she argues that we should specify the agent's knowledge in acting by distinguishing it from common or garden observational knowledge. To put it as generally as possible, it seems that for Anscombe the intentionality of intentional actions goes hand in hand with the capacity of the agent to know *non-observationally* what she is doing.

A first formulation of the problem concerning the role of perception in the grounding of these two forms of knowledge can now be given. Both knowledge in acting and knowledge in the circumstances are forms of practical knowledge: knowledge that brings about what it understands, as opposed to receptive knowledge, which derives from what it understands. In its simplest formulation this is the claim that if I hadn't known I was cutting basil in order to make pesto I simply wouldn't have been cutting basil in order to make pesto; and if I hadn't known I ought not to hang up on Mark because he was vulnerable, I simply wouldn't have been doing what I ought to do in not hanging up the phone on him. But if moral perception –perception that, as we said before, grounds knowledge in the circumstances– is to really deserve the name (i.e. if it is not perception only so-called), then it has got to be understood as sensible affection and thus as a form of receptivity. To perceive Mark's vulnerability and thus know what to do in the circumstances ought to be no more mysterious and no less receptive than seeing your face is bruised and thus know that you've been beaten

⁵ Anscombe, G. E. M., *Intention*, second edition, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1957.

up. But now Anscombe seems to suggest that it is the mark of practical knowledge that it does not rest on sensible affection and thus receptivity. For Anscombe, to say that I see what is happening in the world and thus know what I am doing is to say that my knowledge is not practical and my doing not intentional. The idea seems to be this: sensible affection seems to amount, when things go well, to that knowledge of things in the world which is derived from what is known, receptive knowledge. But we said above that practical knowledge is knowledge that brings about what it understands. Thus, knowledge grounded in sensible receptivity would simply not be of the right kind to be practical. In the face of this then, how can the neo-Aristotelians or Murdoch want to explain a species of practical knowledge (knowledge in the circumstances) as knowledge grounded in perception? How can one form of practical knowledge (knowledge in the circumstances) be identified as grounded in moral perception, while the other form of practical knowledge (knowledge in acting) is identified as contrasting with knowledge grounded in sensible receptivity (knowledge by observation)? What I plan to do over the course of this paper is address this tension.

In the first part I will argue against a tempting two-factor view of knowledge in the circumstances. On this view, knowledge in the circumstances is the result of the joint exercise of two capacities for knowledge, a receptive capacity through which we know what happens to be the case in the agent's environment and a practical capacity through which we know what to do in general. On this account then, knowledge in the circumstances is the knowledge we have when these two capacities for knowledge are exercised jointly.

In the second part I will argue against the attempt to posit moral perception as a special form of sensible receptivity such that it may be the ground of practical, i.e. non receptive, knowledge. On this picture, it is *ordinary* sensible affection that constitutes the ground of receptive knowledge and this leaves it entirely open that a *special* sort of sensible affection may constitute the ground of practical knowledge.

In the third part I will suggest the beginnings of an alternative account. On my view we should distinguish *moral* from *ordinary perception* by distinguishing between distinct forms of knowledge. On my account moral perception is shorthand for a form of knowledge through which

we may know practically what is already available to one's receptive knowledge.

In the fourth part I will deal with a problem that my view seems to face. If knowledge in the circumstances is the knowledge which knows practically exactly what is available through one's receptive knowledge, then we have to say that one and the same thing could be known in two ways; both practically and receptively. But, if there are two ways of knowledge shouldn't there also be two objects known? If we answer this question in the affirmative, then how can I say that in practical knowledge we may know practically what is already available to us in our receptive knowledge?

In the fifth and final part I will suggest that **Anscombe** in her *Intention* answers the same question with regard to knowledge in acting and I will claim that we could give a similar answer to our own question with regard to knowledge in the circumstances. Knowledge in the circumstances and knowledge in acting may thus be seen to constitute two species of one and the same capacity for knowledge: the capacity for self-knowledge.

2. Moral perception as ordinary perception

The most immediately appealing way to address the tension between **Anscombe's** and **Murdoch's** accounts is the following. If practical knowledge is knowledge that brings about what it understands, then it is to be contrasted with receptive knowledge, knowledge that is derived from what it understands. And if this is so, **Anscombe** is simply right to exclude from the realm of the species of practical knowledge she considers (knowledge in acting) perception or any form of receptivity for that matter. **Murdoch** on the other hand is simply confused on this front. The form of practical knowledge she considers, knowledge in the circumstances, cannot *qua* practical knowledge be grounded in perception, or any form of receptivity for that matter. On this view, knowledge in the circumstances is the result of the joint exercise of two capacities for knowledge: a receptive capacity through which we know particular facts that happen to obtain in the agent's environment and a practical capacity through which we know general rules for the setting of

ends, or what to do in general. On this view then moral perception is nothing more than ordinary (i.e., no more mysterious and no less sensible than) receptive knowledge of what happens to be the case in the agent's environment. And practical knowledge is knowledge of what the agent's general rules prescribe for her. Knowledge in the circumstances then is the result of the joint exercise of these two capacities for knowledge. And the object of knowledge in the circumstances is partly known receptively and partly known practically. From now on I will be calling this view *revisionist* for it attempts to resolve the tension between Murdoch's and Anscombe's account by revising Murdoch's account.

It will help to understand this revisionist account to present knowledge in the circumstances in terms of the reasoning structure it is constituted by. Knowledge in the circumstances may be understood in terms of the reasoning that takes us from premises stating general rules about what one ought to do to conclusions about what we ought to do in particular circumstances, via premises that concern the nature of these circumstances. And something about this reasoning, it is commonly thought, is what qualifies knowledge in the circumstances as practical knowledge; I will call it *practical deliberation* or *deliberation* for short.⁶ On this widely accepted view, deliberation involves the application (or the specification, etc.) of *general* rules about what one ought to do, in circumstances that are particular. The form these rules may take varies according to different theories. On some, the rules are general precepts of the form "Do x"; on others, they are general truths of the form "X is good"; etc. But the idea is simple. There are general rules that determine what one ought to do or what it is good to do, etc., *in general*. And the morally trained agent is the one who has been inculcated with these principles in such a way as to be able to *apply* (or specify, understand, interpret, etc.) these principles in particular circumstances, whenever the agent judges that the situation demands it.

Within the context of this widely accepted idea of how we come to have knowledge in the circumstances we may formulate two models of how perception figures in deliberation, both of which deny that there is any distinctive cognitive activity we might want to call *moral* perception.

⁶ I will come back to this idea at the end of the paper.

On the first model, deliberation proceeds as follows: the agent has at her disposal a set of general rules pertaining to what she ought to do. Say that a given agent has been inculcated with the principle that children ought to be protected from abuse. Now, on this model, the agent observes her environment, i.e. registers what happens to be the case in the circumstances she finds herself in. And now say that in this context the agent also registers that a child happens to be abused. Given the existence of this particular perception the agent is in a next phase able to apply her general rule to the particular case presented in her overall perception of her circumstances: If I ought to protect children from abuse and this child here is, as I among other things perceive, being abused, then it follows that I ought to protect this child here from abuse. (If I ought to x in circumstances y and *I perceive that my circumstances here and now include y*, then I ought to here and now x).

Alternatively, on the second model, one determines a most general end; i.e. adopts a most general rule. Say one has adopted the rule that one ought to help one's fellow human beings as one's most general end. To carry out this end, one needs to further figure out the means to this end. And to do this, one needs to have a certain sort of technical experience-knowledge of how to do things that is based on observation of means-end connections of the form "y is the best/easiest/necessary/etc. way to do x". On this model, the agent determines how an end is to be achieved either by retrieving or building up from her repository of previously perceived means-end connections one particular means-end connection. This is what in a next phase enables her to specify the end she adopts: If I ought to do x, and –as I have perceived– the means to x is y, then I ought to do y; with certain qualifications of course, such as that y not be immoral, etc.

Now in a world in which we could not observe our environment (sensibly receive various features of the circumstances we find ourselves in) it is doubtful that we could ever act. And in a world in which we could not gather (technical) experience through our affection by observable means-end connections it is doubtful that we could ever act *well*. But the question now is, is this observation and technical experience sufficient to fit the bill of what we originally wanted to call *moral perception*?

The answer begins to appear negative when we appreciate a certain feature of the way we ordinarily assess others for their actions. The thought is not new. Positively assessing others for their actions presupposes not merely their alignment with what we take to be the right general rules or principles, but also a certain sort of sensitivity that allows them on each occasion to *privilege* some of the features and aspects of the situations with which they are confronted. We praise our child not just for giving half of her sandwich to her hungry classmate, but also for *noticing* the hunger. We are moved when a new acquaintance drops a line to see how we are doing in a time of crisis not just for *doing* what is the friendly thing to do, but also for *seeing* us as a real friend would. In fact, if we are told that our child did something generous upon being told that this was an occasion for generosity and that our new acquaintance gave us a call in order to do what is appropriate by the standards of friendship, we may get disappointed or even unsettled. But now the problem with the aforementioned accounts of moral perception is that this sort of sensitivity –that which we are most inclined to praise on at least some occasions– cannot be presented as an instance of simply registering (receptively knowing) *what happens to be the case* (in one’s environment or with regard to how to do things) or *ordinary perception*, as I will be calling it from now on. Ordinary perception may be presupposed for the noticing of the hunger above, but it does not amount to that noticing. This kind of noticing is more aptly described as a sort of singling out of a feature of the agent’s situation *in* the agent’s perception of what happens to be the case as meriting a certain kind of response. Perhaps, it is more aptly described as a kind of perceiving which presents a feature of the agent’s circumstances not just as what happens to be the case but *as what sticks out* in a certain way; in particular as what calls for action. And it is this singling out or distinctive perceiving which we would like to single out by the name of *moral perception*.

Now, one might object that this singling out of a feature of the agent’s situation as meriting a certain kind of response is not a sort of perception to be distinguished from ordinary perception, but is an activity performed by the rule that figures in the major premise of the practical syllogism. On this view, ordinary perception or receptive knowledge is that through which the agent knows what happens to be the case in her circumstances, and practical knowledge is that through

which the agent knows what general rule to apply in the circumstances. In our abuse example, the agent has at her disposal all the facts of the case through an exercise of her capacity for receptive knowledge. And then the general rule that one ought to save children from abuse picks out one of these facts—that a child is being abused—as what the rule is to be applied to; i.e. as what commands the agent to adopt this general rule as her end in the circumstances.

Now this may seem entirely unproblematic, but it is not. If it is the general rule itself that provides the criteria for its own applicability (it is after all what picks out the relevant feature of the circumstances *as relevant*) then in cases of conflict between rules, there will be no way of determining what general rule to set as an end. For each general rule will be privileging that feature of the circumstances that rightly (by the lights of each rule) calls out for each such rule's applicability. And even if there is no actual conflict, the question still remains: out of the large repository of practical rules that may each time determine the agent's end, what determines which general rule is each time to be *activated*; i.e. which rule is each time to be applied to the agent's circumstances? The distinctive role of moral perception was reserved by the neo-Aristotelian accounts as precisely a way to solve this problem. To do away with the distinctive character of moral perception is to leave this problem pending.

But one might object that this problem could be solved without abandoning the revisionist view. Thus one might insist that the agent perceives various features of the circumstances in which she finds herself through an exercise of her capacity for receptive knowledge; say that there is a child which is getting abused, that the person who abuses the child holds a gun, etc. But then one might add that the agent is the kind of person who has as her *most general end* the rule that one ought to help others in need. And now, one could say that it is this most general end that picks out one of the deliverances of the exercise of our capacity for receptive knowledge (ordinary perception)—say that a child is being abused—as what calls for the *activation* of a less general rule as her end—say to save children from abuse. In this way then, one might still seem able to insist that knowledge in the circumstances is the result of the joint exercise of two knowledges: a receptive knowledge through which the agent knows the particular facts that happen to obtain in her

environment and a practical one through which the agent knows what less general rule to set as an end for herself.

But now the problem is this: in general a capacity is identified as the specific capacity that it is by reference to its active exercise. We learn what a capacity to see is by examining instances of seeing things. And we learn what a capacity to judge is by looking at cases of judging that *x*. If something like this is true in general and we take it that we have the capacity for practical knowledge, then this too would need to be specified as such in terms of its active exercise. Knowledge of what one ought to do falls, as we have assumed in this paper, under the genus of practical knowledge. So it would have to be the case that in the active exercise of the capacity to know what one ought to do, this knowledge would be such as to bring about its object in understanding it. Now if the object that is brought about in the understanding of knowledge of what one ought to do is the individual doing that falls under the general rule,⁷ then this object is only knowable in knowledge in the circumstances. And so the active exercise of our capacity for practical knowledge would have to be the knowledge of what the agent ought to do in the circumstances she finds herself in and not in general. But this is by the lights of the view under consideration the outcome of a joined exercise of two forms of knowledge –one receptive and one practical– which are responsible for knowing different parts of what is known in knowledge in the circumstances. For what is known in knowledge in the circumstances is on this view known partly receptively and partly practically. But then the definition of our capacity for moral *practical* knowledge in terms of its active exercise would be a definition that would essentially involve the capacity for another form of knowledge, the receptive form of knowledge. For the object of knowledge in the circumstances is by the very lights of this view not knowable practically

⁷ One could here object that the object brought about and that is understood in knowledge of what one ought to do is “the highest good” or “happiness”, or something like that, and that the individual action is “merely” connected to that object as a means, which is known through another species of practical knowledge. I cannot argue against this objection here; I can only point out the absurdity of conceiving of knowledge of what one ought to do as practical without conceiving the individual doing that it is productive of as the (result of the) exercise of this knowledge. I owe this objection to [Greg Strom](#).

in its entirety. Thus, the two factor conceptions of knowledge in the circumstances are bound to be misguided. The perception we want to call *moral* must play a role in the constitution of knowledge in the circumstances when we take this knowledge to be practical; and not when we take this knowledge to be receptive. But then, must we not assume that moral perception must be a *special* form of receptivity such that it may ground or be involved in knowledge in the circumstances *qua* practical knowledge? It is this view that I will take up and argue against in the next section.

3. Moral perception as a special sort of sensible receptivity

In the previous section we suggested that we should define moral perception as what delivers insight into what feature of the situation with which the agent is each time confronted *rightly calls out for the application of a general rule*. It is, I believe, this perception that Murdoch explains as the *loving attention* or *gaze* to the particularities of the situation with which the agent is confronted.⁸ And it is the object of this perception that, I believe, David Wiggins explains as “what strikes the person as the *in the situation most salient feature of the context in which he has to act*”;⁹ in other words as the sensitivity not merely to features of one’s situation but to features of one’s situation *as the practically salient features in the situation*. If this is right, then the sort of perception that is involved in practical deliberation cannot be ordinary perception in the sense given by the view described in the previous section; i.e., an instance of receptive knowledge. For to say that this sort of sensitivity (*moral* perception) is sensitivity to salience just is to say that the (salient) feature of the situation is not perceived in the same way as the rest of the features of the situation. It may then begin to seem as if moral perception is a species of receptivity all right, only of a very special sort: one that allows it to ground knowledge in the circumstances *qua* practical knowledge. For how else, might one wonder,

⁸ See for instance Murdoch, I., *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 17-23.

⁹ Wiggins, D., *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 234.

can we explain a sort of perception that is a species of *receptivity* all right, but is such as to ground *practical* knowledge?

But just what might be this special way in which the salient feature of the situation is perceived? One family of views posits moral perception as a *special* receptive faculty alongside our other (perhaps visual, tactile, etc.) receptive faculties, or as a *special* activation of our ordinary receptive faculties, or as the result of the co-operation between perceptual and non-perceptual capacities. A careful and thorough examination of each of the views that assume that the distinctness of moral perception lies in its character as a special receptive faculty would take me far afield. What I shall do instead is draw a taxonomy of these views that will allow me to give a few promissory notes about their dubiousness and a final reason for their failure.

So, if on the one hand we assume that moral perception is to be specified as a mere sensible receptive faculty among or alongside our ordinary sensible receptive faculties (say sight, touch, etc.), we can suggest that (1) The objects of the moral receptive faculty are out there and impinge on our sense organs in more or less the way that the ordinary objects of our other receptive faculties are out there and affect our senses. The only difference is that they are very special objects. They are (or are such as to give rise to) *moral* sensibles as opposed to *ordinary* sensibles (however exactly these sensibles might be conceived in the non-moral case).¹⁰ Now the epistemology of these moral sensibles might be conceived in a variety of ways: (1a) One could suggest that moral sensibles are received by a *special* receptive faculty. The immediate problem with this view is that it does not make much (non-figurative) sense to posit a *special*, i.e., moral receptive faculty without also positing the existence of a moral faculty that can be contrasted with our sensible faculties as such.¹¹ As [John McDowell](#) has argued, this would constitute solving a mysterious problem by positing an even more mysterious and

¹⁰ By the term *sensibles* I simply refer to what the perception of an object presents us with. I don't mean to take a side in the various debates on just what this thing might be.

¹¹ Intuitionism has been the paradigmatic form of this account. See for instance [Moore, G. E.](#), *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1903; [Ross, D.](#), *The Right and the Good*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930.

occult faculty.¹² And it would be to ignore the plain fact that moral perception ought to be no more mysterious and no less sensible than ordinary sensible affection. (1b) Alternatively, one might suggest that moral sensibles are perceived as a result of the co-operation between ordinary perceptual and non-perceptual (say intellectual) faculties.¹³ But this would face a problem analogous to McDowell's problem above: just as (1a) above merely posits a mysterious and occult faculty so (1b) posits some mysterious and occult way of co-operating for two ordinary faculties.¹⁴ (1c) Last, one could suggest that moral sensibles are received by our ordinary receptive faculties. (1c.1) On a weak reading of moral sensibles, moral perception ought to be construed on the model of chess perception. On this view, moral sensibles are like chess sensibles in that they do not differ from other sensibles in their form, but in their subject-matter.¹⁵ Plausible though it may be, this view lacks explanatory power. For moral sensibles were posited exactly in order to explain the possibility of perceiving moral objects in the way one perceives chess pawns. (1c.2) On a stronger reading, moral sensibles are exactly like size or mass sensibles. On this view, we can make room for moral perception only if we develop a less chauvinistic view of the senses. A less chauvinistic view of the senses would allow us for instance to assume that the eye is hit by light in more or less the way it is hit by injustice. But this view would commit us to a whole bunch of counter-intuitive claims, such as saying that failure to perceive injustice might be correctable by a visit to the ophthalmologist.

On the other hand one could suggest that (2) The objects of moral perception are moral super-sensibles that supervene on non-moral

¹² See McDowell, J. H., "Values and Secondary Qualities", in McDowell, J. H., *Mind, Value, and Reality*.

¹³ For a refined view along these lines on which the perceptual capacity in question is an intellectualized perceptual ability, see Watkins, M., – Jolley, K., "Polyanna Realism: Moral Perception and Moral Properties", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (2002), pp. 75-85.

¹⁴ I owe this point to Greg Strom.

¹⁵ Wright, J. C., "The Role of Moral Perception in Mature Moral Agency", in Wisniewski, J. J. (ed.), *Moral Perception*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 1-24.

sensibles in such a way as to be perceived indirectly.¹⁶ Talk of moral perception would in this case be used to signal the existence of a distinctive epistemological connection: say immediate perception of non-moral sensibles plus inference to the existence of moral properties, or immediate perception of non-moral sensibles plus non-inferential judgment that the moral properties constituted by the non-moral properties do in fact exist, etc. But this move makes talk of moral perception figurative at worst and redundant at best. For the point of calling moral perception *perception* was to acknowledge the (seeming at least) fact that the objects of moral perception are “objects of sensible cognition” –i.e., no less available to our receptive faculty through their affection of our sensibility than the objects of ordinary perception. To say that the objects of moral perception are available to our cognition by way of *the* affection of our receptive faculty but not by way of *their* affecting our receptive faculty is to simply ignore the intuition that moral perception is a form of receptivity and simply collapse into the view I argued against in section two. Last, but not least, one could argue that (3) Value perception should be construed on the model of the immediate perception of secondary and not primary properties.¹⁷ But the problem with this suggestion is that the epistemology of the secondary properties themselves is an even more problematic issue.

It seems then that these views can hardly deal with the task of giving an adequate account of moral perception. The reason they can't is that they cannot provide an adequate solution to the task of identifying what a capacity is a capacity for by referring to its active exercise. For, by their lights too, the active exercise of the capacity for moral practical knowledge would be a composite of a practical cognitive and *another* cognitive (albeit special or distinctly receptive) act. In other words, by their lights too, reference to the active exercise of the capacity for moral practical knowledge would not allow us to identify the capacity as

¹⁶ For variants of these views see Audi, R., “Moral Perception and Moral Knowledge”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 84 (2010), pp. 79-97; Cullison, A., “Moral Perception”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 18/2 (2010), pp. 159-175; Norman, R., “Making sense of Moral Realism”, *Philosophical Investigations*, 20 (1997), pp. 117-135; McGrath, S., “Moral Knowledge by Perception”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18/1 (2004), pp. 209-228.

¹⁷ See McDowell, J. H., “Values and Secondary Qualities”.

practical. The problem with the two-factor views examined in the previous section was not that they presented knowledge in the circumstances as the joint exercise of one practical and one *ordinary* receptive knowledge, but that they presented it as the joint exercise of a practical and a non-practical form of knowledge. And the views examined in this section have not done anything to solve this problem.

4. *Moral perception as a form of knowledge*

But we don't have to accept any of the above views in order to talk non-figuratively of moral perception. We can instead deny one driving assumption of all the accounts presented so far. This is the assumption that if what affects our senses can at all be known, it may *only* be known receptively. We may thus distinguish between different sorts of perception not in accordance with a prior distinction between species of sensible receptivity, but in accordance with a prior distinction between distinct *cognitive activities*. To do this, one ought to *look not to the objects of these activities qua operations of the receptivity, but to their credentials as cognitive activities*. On this line of thought, we should take ordinary perception and moral perception to be short hands for two distinct forms of knowledge. Thus, by *ordinary perception* we might now understand that knowledge, whose credentials include all that sensibly testifies to whether things really are as the agent takes them to be; e.g., the proper function of the sense organs and the truth-attaining reasoning capacities of the perceiver and the perceiving conditions that allow for this proper function (e.g., natural light conditions, the position of the perceiver with regard to the perceived object, availability of background knowledge about things, etc.). And we might also say that the nature of these credentials –that they all pertain to whether the agent's grasp of how things are is as it ought to be *given how things are*– qualifies the knowledge as receptive: knowledge that is derived from what is known. In contrast, by *moral perception* we could understand that knowledge whose credentials *qua* knowledge include all that testifies to whether the agent's grasp of how things are in her situation is as it ought to be *given what must matter to her*, e.g., the proper shaping of one's character (the form of the (habitually) shaped interests and concerns of a mature human individual) and the

conditions that do not hinder the proper expression of this character (e.g., not being drunk or devastated). And we might also say that the nature of the credentials –that they all pertain to whether the agent’s grasp of how things are in her situation is as it ought to be *given what must matter to her*– qualifies the relevant knowledge as practical: knowledge that brings about what it understands.

On this account, we can distinguish between moral and ordinary perception without having to assume that when one knows one and the same thing by way of moral and ordinary perception one knows two different objects or species of objects. The reason is that moral perception does not constitute a form of receptive knowledge at all. It constitutes a form of practical knowledge: knowledge that is in understanding productive of this feature of the situation’s mattering to it as it should. And so when she knows a feature of her situation practically she does not thus know an object over and above the object that she knows in receptive knowledge.

But now the question arises: How is it possible to know non-receptively a thing that is also known receptively? We do after all talk of moral *perception* and not merely of moral knowledge. We do talk of *bearing* Mark’s vulnerability (being *affected* by Mark’s vulnerability) when we talk of knowing what we ought to do in the relevant cases, and we do not want to take this talk metaphorically. Receptivity must somehow feature in the picture. But if moral perception is shorthand for practical knowledge, then must we not fit receptivity together with practicality? And does this not bring us back to the views discussed in the previous two sections?

This question may also be posed in the following way: when one knows what one ought to do in moral perception, one also has receptive knowledge of what one knows in moral perception. To illustrate this let us take a case in which what is perceived is only known receptively and a case in which what is perceived is also known practically. Take the first case first: Say I help administer a psychological experiment in which I am told by the researcher to register all of the participant’s reactions. And now say that in this context I perceive Mark’s vulnerability and in this perceiving receptively know it. I can if asked tell you how things stand with regard to Mark’s psychological condition; and how things are will be the judge of whether my claim is knowledge or not. But now let us think

of a different scenario and say that while I'm administering the psychological experiment on Mark I decide to stop the experiment because I register Mark's vulnerability. Now in this latter case my knowledge of Mark's vulnerability is distinctive in a very straightforward sense; it is what prompts me to do something, as opposed to what simply acquaints me with how things stand in the world. But to have this distinctive knowledge at all I must be acquainted with how things stand in the world; I must have receptive knowledge of how Mark's psychology is faring. In similar cases then we may speak of two ways of knowing being operative. But now the question arises: if we may speak of two ways of knowing (of one thing) ought we also not speak of two objects known? And if we do speak of two objects known are we not again supposing that there must be a very special and queer sort of receptive faculty that allows us to know practically (in knowledge in the circumstances) one of the two objects? This I want to say in the following section is the question that [Anscombe](#) deals with towards the end of her *Intention*. And it is by looking at Anscombe's answer to this question that we may find a way out of the current predicament. Doing so will help us better understand how it is possible to know non-receptively a thing that is available to us in receptive knowledge. And this will help us appreciate what knowledge in the circumstances and knowledge in acting share in common.

5. *Anscombe's problem and practical knowledge as self-knowledge*

As I said in the introduction, [Anscombe](#) argues in *Intention* that the topic of intentional action is non-circularly captured by specifying the agent's distinctive knowledge of what she is doing when she is acting intentionally (knowledge in acting). And, she suggests, the agent's knowledge in acting is known *without observation*. To put it as generally as possible, it seems that for [Anscombe](#) the intentionality of intentional actions goes hand in hand with the capacity of the agent to know what she is doing *non-observationally*. It is useful to consider [Anscombe's](#) worry about knowledge in acting here, because the object of this knowledge, i.e. the intentional action, is also a happening that *can* be the object of a different species of knowledge; observational or receptive knowledge. As

Michael Thompson observes, there is tons of stuff we know non-observationally –i.e. thoughts, intentions, mathematical truths, etc.¹⁸ But as Thompson also observes, intentional actions are epistemologically distinct from mere thoughts or even intentions in that, no matter whether the agent has non-observational epistemological access to them –they are also available (at least to a third party) as merely observable.¹⁹ And, Anscombe asks: if in the case of a particular intentional action –say the opening of a window– we may speak of two ways of knowing it, one observational and one not, then must we not also speak of two objects? One being what I’m doing and the other being what happens as a result of what I’m doing. If not, then how is it possible to speak of two ways of knowing one and the same object? But if we speak of two ways of knowing one and the same object, she says, ought we not to speak of two objects really?²⁰

But one may here object that the case of knowledge in acting is not analogous to the case of knowledge in the circumstances, because knowledge in acting is for Anscombe explicitly defined as knowledge *without observation*; whereas, on the Murdochean view, knowledge in the circumstances explicitly involves *perception*. Consequently, in the case of knowledge in the circumstances we have reason to suppose that the problem of the possibility of two knowledges of one and the same thing is a significant problem. It is after all explicit that in this sort of non-receptive knowledge receptivity must be involved. Whereas in the case of knowledge in acting, the sort knowledge Anscombe considers is explicitly defined as not involving any observation and so any operation of our receptivity. That what is known by the agent in knowledge in acting may also be known observationally from a third person’s perspective should not be particularly alarming. There is after all nothing too problematic about the claim that one and the same thing might be known in different ways from different perspectives.

But this hesitation rests upon a mistaken interpretation of Anscombe. In the rest of this section I will try to clear out the mistake. As

¹⁸ See Thompson, M., “Anscombe’s *Intention* and Practical Knowledge”, in Ford, A. – Hornsby, J. – Stoutland, F. (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*.

¹⁹ See Thompson, M., “Anscombe’s *Intention* and Practical Knowledge”.

²⁰ See Anscombe, G. E. M., *Intention*, p. 51.

McDowell stresses,²¹ some of the most interesting cases of intentional action that Anscombe considers are cases in which one must *look* at what one is doing to know *in action* that one is doing it. To bring this point home McDowell focuses on her example of writing on the board. To know that I am writing ‘I am a fool’ on the board, I must be looking to see whether I’m indeed writing at all. This and similar cases *might* make it seem as if knowledge in acting must be knowledge by observation *in some sense* of observation. And so, to keep with Anscombe’s thesis that knowledge in acting is knowledge without observation, interpreters have struggled to specify exactly that species of observation that Anscombe must mean to include in knowledge in acting. So, for instance, interpreters have suggested that the observation Anscombe means to include in knowledge in acting is the observation of inner mental items – such as intentions– from which (together with knowledge of facts of causal or reliable connections with events in the world) the agent infers – and thus comes to know– what she is doing.²² Others have suggested that the observation Anscombe means to include in knowledge in acting is some sort of introspective or proprioceptive perception, such that it suffices on its own to constitute non-inferential knowledge of what one is doing.²³ Yet others have suggested that what Anscombe means to exclude from knowledge in acting is some kind of active or self-controlling perception, thus excluding passive perception.²⁴ But no matter how appealing these interpretations may seem, they are revisionist. They simply fail to take Anscombe’s crystal clear injunction

²¹ McDowell, J. H., “How Receptive Knowledge relates to Practical Knowledge”, (unpublished). I owe a lot of what I understand about Anscombe’s conception of the role of receptivity in Anscombe’s account of knowledge in acting to this paper.

²² The core of such views is usually called ‘two factor thesis’. See Falvey, K. T., “Knowledge in Intention”, *Philosophical Studies*. For a recent version of it see for instance Paul, S. K., “How We Know What We’re Doing”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 9/11 (2009), pp. 1-24.

²³ See Velleman, D., “What Good is a Will?”, in Leist, A. – Baumann, H. (eds.), *Action in Context*, Berlin – New York, de Gruyter – Mouton, 2007; O’Brien, L. F., “On Knowing One’s Own Actions”, in Roessler, J. – Eilan, N. (eds.), *Agency and Self-Awareness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp 358-382.

²⁴ Schwenkler, J., “Perception and Practical Knowledge”, *Philosophical Explorations*, 14/2 (2011), pp. 137-152; Grunbaum, T., “Anscombe and Practical Knowledge of What Is Happening”, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 78 (2009), pp. 41-67.

to heart: knowledge in acting ought to be understood, if at all, as knowledge without observation; and not as knowledge without this or that kind of observation. And yet, there are cases, as McDowell insists, in which the agent herself has to look to what is happening if she is to know in action what she is doing. How are we to explain these cases given Anscombe's clear thesis?

One could suggest that knowledge in acting merely *presupposes* some receptive knowledge of what is happening but it can never be *exactly* of what this receptive knowledge is knowledge of. But this is to return to a two-factor view of knowledge. In other words, on this line of thinking, one would have to claim that to know in action (at least sometimes) one needs to both observe what is happening and “in some other way” know what one is doing where what is happening is not what one is doing. But given Anscombe's insistence that knowledge in acting is knowledge without observation, knowledge in acting would have to be the latter form of knowledge, and this knowledge would not on its own be able to yield knowledge of what one is actually doing.²⁵ And this is a consequence that Anscombe does not want to be left with.

We can explain the cases McDowell insists on without revising the Anscombean thesis that knowledge in acting is knowledge without observation and without reverting to a two-factor view. What one knows in knowledge in acting one does not know by observation. But what one knows in knowledge in acting may nevertheless be *of* what is knowable receptively. The sense in which knowledge in acting involves knowledge by observation is the sense in which knowledge in acting may be *of* what is known receptively *that it is* what the agent *herself* is doing. For instance, of the writing of the phrase “I am a fool” on the blackboard I know that it is what *I* am doing, and I know this non-observationally. But the appearing of the phrase on the board is available to me in receptive knowledge. And now the question is exactly parallel to the question we asked above in the case of knowledge in the circumstances: how is it possible to have two knowledges of one and the same thing (the writing on the board) without having two objects known?

²⁵ This is roughly equivalent to McDowell's argument against the two factor views in the case of theoretical knowledge. See McDowell, J. H., “Knowledge and the Internal”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55/4 (1995), pp. 877-893.

We are now in a position to see how Anscombe's answer to this question show us the way to answer the equivalent question in the case of knowledge in the circumstances. Ultimately, the fact that we can answer this question in the same way in both cases of knowledge points to the unity of the two forms of knowledge.

In Anscombe's example, I'm writing "I'm a fool" on the board. And to know (in acting) that I am writing "I am a fool" on the board, I need to look to see what is happening; i.e., I need to look to see that what I am writing gets written. As I urged above, we must take this to mean that what is happening there –that what I'm writing gets written– is known in two ways: by observation and in acting. And then it seems natural to ask the question raised at the end of the previous section: how is it possible to have two knowledges without also having two objects known? In other words, how is it possible to claim that we can know one thing in two ways without assuming that what is thus known is two different objects?

In answering this question previously, Anscombe reports that she had said that there are no two different objects known because in this case "I do what happens". Or else, because "...when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening".²⁶ But what is this response if not a *mere insistence* that what is known in the two ways is one and the same thing? Everyone who heard the phrase, Anscombe says, thought it was extremely paradoxical and obscure.²⁷ And she notes later on that this puzzlement may have been caused by something modern philosophers have blankly misunderstood: "namely what the ancient and medieval philosophers meant by practical knowledge".²⁸ Anscombe's suggestion here is that the inability to understand the phrase "I do what happens" and the inability to accept the possibility of knowing one and the same thing in two ways is due to the inability to understand just what one of these two ways of knowing might be; i.e., what practical knowledge really is.

²⁶ Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*, pp. 52-53.

²⁷ See Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*, p. 53.

²⁸ Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*, p. 57.

By Anscombe's lights it is not puzzling at all to say that in the cases where one has to look to see if what one is writing gets written when what I'm writing gets written, I do what happens. The reason that it is not puzzling is that there is a form of knowledge which in itself is not receptive but may be of what receptive knowledge is of, that it is what oneself is doing. In simpler words, when what is happening is what I should say I was doing, I may know one and the same thing in two ways: I may know what is happening receptively, and I may know of what is happening, which is available to me receptively, that it is what *I* am doing. And it is this, that what is happening is what *I* am doing, that I know non-receptively or non-observationally. So, in knowing in acting what is happening I know no new or different thing over and above the one I know in receptively knowing –looking at– what is happening, because in this case my knowledge is not mere knowledge of an object (a thing known receptively) as such. It is knowledge of an object (a thing known receptively) that it is what *I* am doing. And it is in this sense an instance of self-knowledge. Knowledge that what is happening is what *I* am doing. Of a happening then I may have two knowledges: knowledge of the happening as *other*, and thus *receptive knowledge*, and knowledge of the happening as what *I* do and thus self-knowledge.

But now one may object: if practical knowledge may be of what is happening in this sense, then how is it that it is the cause of what it understands? For if it is knowledge of something that is known receptively, it must be knowledge of something that is there already, must it not? In what sense then can knowledge of *what is happening* be knowledge that is *practical*; i.e., that causes what it understands? Or in other words, *what is that which is caused in practically knowing what is happening?* It is, as Anscombe argues in the very last part of her *Intention*, the *action form* of what is happening; this distinctive order of the world which, for Anscombe, is specified by two things: 1) that it is what the burden of correction falls on when there is a mismatch between the knowledge claims and what the knowledge claims are of²⁹ and 2) that this order is the conclusion of one's *practical reasoning*, or the structure that answers to a *special question why*.³⁰

²⁹ See Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*, pp. 56-57.

³⁰ For more on this see Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*, p. 57.

From this we see that what modern philosophers have blankly misunderstood is that when the medieval and the ancient philosophers talked of practical knowledge they talked of self-knowledge of the kind that un-problematically extends *all the way* to what is happening –and not to part of what is happening at best– and *thereby* gives it its action form. In this sense then, Anscombe’s phrase “I do what happens” is to be taken literally. And practical knowledge is the knowledge of what happens as what I do.

From this we can now see how to answer the equivalent question for knowledge in the circumstances. We said in section four that we can take ordinary and moral perception to be shorthands for two forms of knowledge that may be of one and the same thing, because moral perception need not be taken to constitute a species of receptive knowledge. We are now in a position to see how moral perception may be understood as constituting a species of practical knowledge, which is to be contrasted with receptive knowledge. When we say that I perceive Mark’s vulnerability morally we are saying that I know of Mark’s vulnerability –which is rendered available to me in receptive knowledge– that it is what *I* ought to do something about. The emphasis is on the “I”; when I morally perceive something I *ipso facto* know what *I* ought to do; or at the very least I know *I* (and not *one* or *any human being* or *any rational being*, etc.) ought to do something. Think of walking by a beggar on the street on your way to work. If you happen to (rightly) believe in philanthropy, in seeing the extended hand you may know of it that is what you ought to leave some of your change in. Or, if you happen to (rightly) believe in change and not philanthropy, you may know of it that it is what you ought to change the world for. Or if you happen to (rightly) believe that change is necessary but impossible, you may know of it that it is what you ought to do the impossible for. This self-knowledge is not the disoriented attention to oneself that Murdoch warns us against in urging us to see that the true moral task that lies ahead of us is the loving surrender to the endlessness of the other. It is not the neurotic focus on oneself in the presence of moral demand. On the contrary; it is the recognition of the simple truth that what *we* ought to do is out there; we see it. We don’t need to *infer* what it is that *we* ought to do from any general principles detailing what rational or human or any other beings ought to do and what *our* receptively knowable

circumstances are. And we don't need to infer what it is that *we* ought to do from any general desires of *ours* (together with the above mentioned general principles) and what *our* receptively knowable circumstances are.³¹ What it is that *we* ought to do, we do not know by seeing in a queer way nor by seeing queer stuff, but by seeing Mark's vulnerability and the extended hand, and knowing of them that they are what *we* ought to do something for or about. But if this is practical knowledge we are talking of, we need to specify the sense in which it is the cause of what it understands. It is after all dubious to even imply that the demandingness of a moral situation is only there if the agent thinks it is. But the species of practical knowledge we are talking about here is the cause of what *it* understands. And what it understands is not the demandingness of a moral situation conceived as external to the capacity of the agent to fall under it. What our species of practical knowledge understands is the demandingness of a moral situation as internal to the capacity of the agent to fall under it. What it understands (and thus brings about) is the thing known (Mark's vulnerability let's say) as actually operative on the agent's capacity to fall under the demandingness of moral situations. In simpler words, if the agent didn't know of Mark's vulnerability that it was what she ought to do something about, then in the circumstances the agent wouldn't be thinking or doing what she ought to in whatever it was that she was thinking or doing. And it is in this sense that knowledge in the circumstances brings about what it understands.

The account of knowledge in acting and knowledge in the circumstances presented in this paper does not aspire to constitute a full account of practical knowledge. But it is the beginning, I believe, of an account of practical knowledge that does away with the tension I started this paper with: the tension between the role of perception in the Anscombean conception of knowledge in acting and the Murdochian conception of knowledge in the circumstances. That is, if we follow the lead of this account, we may see that **Anscombe** never meant to deny that what is perceived (receptively known) may not be that of which the agent knows that she does it. And that **Murdoch** never meant to affirm

³¹ This is not to say that the order that our moral action or thinking reflects may not be represented in a syllogistic structure. It is to say though that *we* do not need to think syllogistically to be morally necessitated, to fully fall under a moral principle.

that what is morally perceived (practically known in the circumstances) is known *receptively* in knowledge in the circumstances. On the contrary; both Anscombe and Murdoch meant to explain knowledge in acting and knowledge in the circumstances as species of self-knowledge: knowledge concerning something –which may or may not be receptively known– that it is either what the agent *herself* does or what the agent *herself* ought to do something for. And they both meant to make sure that we understand that this knowledge is spontaneous as an instance of self-knowledge. Now it may be that both Anscombe and Murdoch are wrong about what they take knowledge in acting and knowledge in the circumstances to be. Or at least I've said nothing in this paper to show that their accounts *must* be right. What I hope to have done though is to say something about why their accounts could and should be defended together. And this, that their views allow for a unitary account of a species of moral and a species of action knowledge, must be a sign; a sign of truth.

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