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# Moral Perception without (Prior) Moral Knowledge

*Preston J. Werner*

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

*pjwerner1@gmail.com*

## Abstract

Proponents of impure moral perception claim that, while there are perceptual moral experiences, these experiences epistemically depend on a priori moral knowledge. Proponents of pure moral perception claim that moral experiences can justify independently of substantive a priori moral knowledge. Some philosophers, most notably David Faraci (2015), have argued that the pure view is mistaken, since moral perception requires previous moral background knowledge, and such knowledge could not itself be perceptual. I defend pure moral perception against this objection. I consider two ways to understand the notion of “background knowledge” that is crucial to the objection. On a (stronger) reading, the claim that background knowledge is necessary for moral perception is likely false. On a second and weaker reading, the claim is true, but the background knowledge in question could be perceptual, and thus compatible with pure moral perception. Thus, the objection fails.

## Keywords

moral epistemology – moral perception – perception – moral knowledge – ethics

If moral properties are represented in perceptual experience, as proponents of moral perception argue, then there is a plausible *a posteriori* route to moral

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Preston J. Werner is a lecturer at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research focuses on moral epistemology, philosophy of perception, and normative ethics. He received his PhD in 2016 from Syracuse University.

knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Thus, proponents of moral perception hope to supplement *a priori* moral epistemology. More ambitious proponents of moral perception hope not just to supplement *a priori* moral epistemology, but to replace it with a purely *a posteriori* moral epistemology.

Below, I defend this more ambitious view from a serious objection. The issue that underlies this objection can be found in several places,<sup>2</sup> but has been most developed by David Faraci.<sup>3</sup> The idea is this: In order for our perceptual experiences to have moral content, they would have to be influenced by background moral knowledge. This background knowledge couldn't itself be perceptual. So if we have moral knowledge, we must have some basic *a priori* source of moral justification. Thus, the purely perceptual view fails.

I argue that this objection fails. In section 1, I provide some necessary background on moral perception. In section 2, I summarize the objection to what I call "purely" perceptual views. In section 3, I begin my response to the objection by focusing on two different ways of understanding the notion of "background knowledge", upon which the objection rests. In light of these two readings, I consider the objection's plausibility, arguing that it fails on both readings. In section 4, I consider whether my response depends on rejecting Access Internalism about justification, arguing that, despite initial appearances, it does not. In section 5, I address a remaining regress worry. In section 6, I summarize where things stand with respect to purely perceptual moral epistemology.

## 1 Moral Perception: Pure vs. Impure Views

Before delving into the arguments against pure moral perception, let me make explicit some claims I'll assume in what follows. First, I'll be assuming what Susanna Siegel calls the "Content View" – the view that "experiences have contents, where contents are a kind of condition under which experiences are

1 For defenses, see Cullison (2010), McBrayer (2010a, 2010b), Roeser (2011), Audi (2010, 2013), and Werner (2016). For criticisms, see Sturgeon (2002), Huemer (2008, especially 4.4), Faraci (2015), and Värynen (forthcoming).

2 Faraci (2015). Cowan (2014) and Värynen (forthcoming, pp. 12, 18) both gesture toward a similar point, and for this reason only discuss "impure" perceptualist views. Sturgeon (2002) is a relevant precursor here, though he is more concerned with the dispute between foundationalism and coherentism in moral epistemology. Wedgwood (2001) objects to moral perception through affective experiences on similar grounds. (I believe what I say in what follows can be applied, *mutadis mutandis*, to affective conceptions of moral perception.) See also Cowan (2013, Sect. 4).

3 Faraci (2015).

accurate”.<sup>4</sup> On the content view, for example, when I look at a table with a cup on it, I have a certain experience. This experience represents the world as being a certain way, for example, of there being a table in front of me with a cup on it.<sup>5</sup> And insofar as it represents things this way, it can be accurate or inaccurate – depending on whether there really is a table in front of me with a cup on it. Second, I’ll be assuming *liberalism* about perceptual content – the view that at least some high-level properties (natural kind properties, artifact properties, relational properties) can be part of the contents of perceptual experience.<sup>6</sup> Neither of these assumptions is uncontroversial amongst philosophers of perception. However, if moral perception is possible, whether of a pure or an impure sort, then both of the above assumptions are correct. Since the present dispute concerns the *nature* of moral perception, rather than its *existence*, these assumptions should be safe to make in what follows.

We can divide perceptualist views into two camps: what I’ll call “pure” vs. “impure” perceptualism.<sup>7</sup> Granting that moral properties figure in the contents of experience, there remains the question of whether these representations are supported – causally and epistemically – by evaluative beliefs. On an impure view, moral epistemology retains a substantive *a priori* component because justification-transferring moral perceptions are influenced in turn by moral beliefs which are justified *a priori*. Suppose, as in Harman’s famous example, that Emily rounds a corner and sees some kids lighting a cat on fire.<sup>8</sup> Moral perceptualists agree that *badness* can figure in the content of Emily’s perceptual experience. Defenders of an impure view will argue that this is only so because Emily has some prior moral belief(s) which cognitively penetrate her perceptual processing to generate her moral experience.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, a defender of a purely perceptual view disputes the claim that prior moral beliefs are required for generating moral perceptions.<sup>10</sup> Emily may have not

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4 Siegel (2010), p. 4.

5 Or for those with more conservative leanings about the content of experience, that there are certain shapes and colors in front of me.

6 This terminology is Bayne’s (2009).

7 This terminology is Faraci’s (2015).

8 Harman (1977).

9 For a detailed look at the relationship between cognitive penetration and moral perception, see Cowan (2014), (2015).

10 More carefully, she denies that prior moral beliefs need to play work in the justification-conferring status of moral perceptual experiences. If moral experiences can be causally dependent on prior moral beliefs without thereby being epistemically dependent, then prior moral beliefs may be relevant, even compatible with a purely perceptualist view. (See Werner (forthcoming) for this kind of strategy.) I set this complication aside in what follows.

formed any beliefs about the suffering of animals prior to seeing the cat set ablaze, and yet she still may experience it as *bad*.<sup>11,12</sup> The core of the purely perceptual view, then, is that all justified moral beliefs bottom out in moral perceptions.<sup>13</sup> No substantive *a priori* moral epistemology is required. Those who advance the objection being discussed can grant for the sake of argument that moral properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. So the objection doesn't tell against impure views.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 The Objection from the Necessity of Background Knowledge

Faraci's argument against pure views boils down to the core claim that successful moral perception is only possible if the perceptions are mediated by "background knowledge of some relation between moral and non-moral properties".<sup>15</sup> The idea, briefly, is this: In order for our perceptual experiences to have moral content, they would have to be influenced by background moral knowledge. But this background knowledge couldn't itself be perceptual. So if we have moral knowledge, we must have at least some basic *a priori* source of moral justification. Thus, the purely perceptual view fails. Here is a simplified version of Faraci's argument:<sup>16</sup>

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- 11 One indirect piece of support for this approach is that there seem to be cases where moral perceptions can conflict with our evaluative beliefs, causing us to question or refine those beliefs. This is pointed out by Werner (1983) and McNaughton (1988, 102–103). But for a skeptical view that this provides the support it is claimed to, see Sturgeon (2002, 206).
- 12 Of course, this may also not be the case—it may be that Emily's moral perception in this case is partially a result of her prior moral beliefs. But insofar as this is so, on the purely perceptual view, these prior moral beliefs must themselves have been justified via moral perceptual experience.
- 13 I take both the pure and impure views to be compatible with a wide variety of theories of justification of both internalist and externalist forms.
- 14 According to what I'll call *Simple Perceptualism*, moral properties are part of the contents of perceptual experience in the same way that, for example, tables and chairs are. On the other hand, according to *Affective Perceptualism*, moral properties are presented, not within the traditional sensory modalities, but within affective or emotional experience. The objection discussed in this paper can be run against both. Faraci focuses on *Simple Perceptualism*, but others, e.g. Wedgwood (2001) runs a similar argument against *Affective Perceptualism*. I remain neutral between these two versions of perceptualism, as well as between potential hybrid views, in what follows (though see section 5).
- 15 Faraci (2015), 2063.
- 16 The argument is, with minor differences, directly quoted from Faraci (2015), p. 2063. Faraci later refines Mediation and Grounding in light of some complications (2063–2066).

1. *Mediation (M)*. If perceptions of X are grounded in experiences *as of* Y, then perceptions of X produce knowledge only if they are mediated by background knowledge of some relation between X and Y.
  2. *Grounding*. If perceptions of X track experiences *as of* Y even in the absence of X, the best explanation is that perceptions of X are grounded in experiences *as of* Y.
  3. In epistemically successful cases, perceptions of moral properties track non-moral experiences even in the absence of the relevant moral properties.
- C. Therefore, in epistemically successful cases, moral perception is mediated by background knowledge of some relation between moral and non-moral properties – i.e., of moral bridge principles.

Let's take each premise in turn. The plausibility of M can be shown by *reductio*. Suppose M is false. Then Emily could have a perception of some property X which is grounded in an experience *as of* Y. Emily has no beliefs about the relationship between Y and X. And yet, Emily is justified in forming beliefs about X based on her perception. Intuitively, the problem is that it is difficult to locate the source of justification for Emily's beliefs about X. It's implausible to think that her experience of Y alone could justify Emily in any belief about X, without any knowledge about the relationship between Ys and Xs.

Premise 2, Grounding, provides a test for whether perceptions of one set of properties are grounded in perceptual experiences of another. Suppose we replicate the purported base set of properties Y without the set of properties X, and agents still perceive things as if X were present. According to Grounding, this shows that it is the experiences of X depend on perceptual inputs as of Y. For example, suppose Norm is able to perceive Vera's anger. We might wonder whether Norm's perception is grounded in other perceptual properties, e.g. Vera's facial expression. According to Grounding, we would test this hypothesis by (counterfactually) assessing whether Norm would perceive Vera as angry even if Vera was not angry but exhibited the same lower level perceptual properties (for example, if she were very good at feigning anger). If such cases result in 'false positives', then Norm's perceptions of anger are grounded in his perceptions of these lower level features.<sup>17</sup>

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As these complications are unrelated to the discussion that follows, for simplicity, I stick to Faraci's rough characterization of the argument.

17 The Norm/Vera case is Faraci's (2015, 2058–2059). Note that (as Faraci agrees) there is nothing intrinsically epistemically problematic with a perception of one property's

Premise three claims that the perceptions of moral properties are grounded in non-moral perceptions. Faraci defends this claim at length by appeal to counterfactual tests of the sort mentioned in the Norm/Vera case.<sup>18</sup> In short, it seems as though perceptions of moral properties are grounded in perceptions of non-moral properties. For example, Emily's perception of *badness* in the burning cat is grounded in things like her perception of the cat's behavior and appearance. As I find both this claim and his arguments for it intuitively plausible, I propose to grant it in what follows.

### 3 Grounding, Mediation, and Two Understandings of Background Knowledge

Assuming the validity of the argument, the more substantive premises are M and Grounding. I have some worries about the strength of Grounding,<sup>19</sup> but I will set these aside in what follows.<sup>20</sup> Instead, turn to M:

(M) If perceptions of X are grounded in experiences *as of* Y, then perceptions of X produce knowledge only if they are mediated by background knowledge of some relation between X and Y.

We saw (M)'s initial plausibility above: Given that X and Y are non-identical, it's difficult to see how an experience about Y could straightaway generate

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being grounded in perception of another. It is only when coupled with M that this sort of grounding can raise epistemic worries against pure perceptualist views.

18 See Faraci (2015), Sect. 2.1.

19 I think Grounding, as a general claim, is too strong because it may turn out that the perception of some high level properties is holistic. This could occur if the lower level perceptual information processing triggered an experience of a high level property while the lower level information isn't itself part of that experience. Facial recognition provides a plausible example of this: Akira may experience Rebekah's face without thereby experiencing the lower level properties of Rebekah's face (from this angle, in this lighting, etc.). Once the low level perceptual information triggers Akira's recognitional concept of Rebekah's face, the story goes, the low level information drops out of the picture. Setting the concerns about holism aside, a weakened version of Grounding plausibly still applies to moral perception, even if it doesn't apply in the case of something like face perception.

20 To be clear, I don't have a view on whether Grounding holds with respect to moral perception. But in the interest of granting opponents of the pure view as much as possible, I assume in what follows that it's correct. I don't want to take a stand here in part because I think this is an extremely vexed question that will turn on both controversial phenomenological and empirical claims.

knowledge about X without some further supplementation to justify the move from information about Y to knowledge about X. For example, it's difficult to see how an experience of a red, roundish blob in one's perceptual experience could straightaway generate knowledge of tomatoes without her knowledge that red, roundish blobs of a certain sort in her perceptual experience mark out tomatoes in her environment. What must this supplementation look like? Compare two notions of "background knowledge" of a relation between X and Y:

*Thick BK:* An agent has *Thick BK* about the relationship between X and Y just in case she has a belief or cluster of beliefs which reach the status of propositional knowledge concerning the relationship between experiences *as of Y* and the presence of X.

*Thin BK:* An agent has *Thin BK* about the relationship between X and Y just in case she either (a) has *Thick BK*, or (b) her perceptual system contains subdoxastic information states which ground reliable transitions from perceptual information about Y to perceptual information as of X.

Thick BK is a relatively straightforward notion, at least for our purposes. Thick BK involves propositional, agential knowledge about the connection between experiences as of X and the presence of Y. For example, a physicist can confirm the presence of a particle in a cloud chamber by perceiving a cloud trail along with her agential knowledge that cloud trails (in this context) indicate the presence of a particle having moved in a certain direction.

Thin BK (clause (b)) refers to subpersonal information encoded within a given perceptual system. This information is necessary for the perceptual system to represent determinate contents, since perceptual inputs are radically underdetermined. Exactly how perceptual systems do this, and how to model it, is a vexed issue in cognitive science.<sup>21</sup> Thankfully, we can sidestep those debates. What matters for the present purposes is that such information exists and allows for perceptual systems to represent content which outstrips its physical inputs. Perceptual scientists have long known that our perceptual system can encode complicated information, since our perceptual inputs radically

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21 This problem is often referred to as the underdetermination or "inverse" problem for perception. Scholl (2005) puts this problem in the most eloquent way: "Perhaps the most fundamental fact about visual perception is that this task is, strictly speaking, impossible... there are always a multitude of possible structures in the world that could have given rise to those same patterns of light." (40–41).

underdetermine the state of our local environment, and yet, except in exceptional cases, we perceptually experience the world determinately and accurately.<sup>22</sup> Again, we need not worry about the complicated empirical details here: What is important is that our perceptual systems do encode various bits of information which play a role in the generation of perceptual experience.

We can understand the claim about background knowledge in M as either Thick BK or Thin BK.<sup>23</sup> I'll presently argue that if "background knowledge" in M is read as Thick BK, it is likely false. Alternatively, if it is read as Thin BK, the argument loses its force.

Begin with the reading of M as Thick BK. On such a reading, M is false. Consider the perception of an ordinary object like a chair. An agent starts with some low level visual information – lines, edges, shadings, and colors of various sorts. As a result of perceptual processing applied to these low level features, a perceptual experience of a chair is generated. Let's further suppose that this is a knowledge-generating perception of a chair. If the thick reading of M were correct, the move from low level features to the successful perception of the chair would require a perceiver to have some cluster of beliefs about the sorts of low level features that are reliable indicators of the presence and location of chairs. Though someone could try to formulate a "theory of chairs", it seems radically implausible that any such theory is at work in the ordinary perception of chairs by ordinary agents, if we understand theory here as involving full-blown propositional attitudes.<sup>24</sup>

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22 The idea of "unconscious inferences" within the perceptual system goes back to Helmholtz (1866/1911). More contemporary models of these informational transformations within the perceptual system are Bayesianism (see, e.g. Rescorla 2015) and Predictive Coding (e.g. Huang & Rao 2011).

23 A third option, that the supplementation is a result of a rational intuition, may also provide a bridge between a low-level perception and a justified moral belief. (See Chudnoff (forthcoming) for reasons to favor this possibility.) This third option would not be Perceptualist in the sense that the moral justification on this approach relies on a substantive *a priori* source of justification, intuitions. Of course, that's not meant to be an objection to the view, only to provide an explanation as to why such a moral epistemology is outside of the scope of this paper.

24 A referee points out that perception of chairs (or other ordinary objects) may at least require the deployment of a chair concept. This seems correct, at least on one understanding of what a concept is. It's plausible that what categorizes objects into types in perceptual processing are properly called concepts (or recognitional concepts). But we want to distinguish this from a notion of concepts according to which they can be analyzed into necessary and sufficient conditions via reflection.

Auditory cases of high level perception also help to illustrate this.<sup>25</sup> I can, typically, effortlessly distinguish the sound of a piano from that of an acoustic guitar. But I couldn't even begin to explain this difference or point to the low level qualities of tone and timbre that ground their differences.<sup>26</sup> I have no beliefs, much less knowledge, of how I go from low level auditory information to the auditory experience of a piano.<sup>27</sup> On the thick reading of "background knowledge", then, M is likely false.

On the other hand, if we understand "background knowledge" in M in the thin way, M is much more plausible. On such a reading, any knowledge of X that is grounded in Y needs to be supplemented by some reliable transition from information about Y to an experience of X.<sup>28</sup> On this reading, M is extremely plausible, since otherwise the generation of a knowledge-conferring experience of X appears inexplicable. When the transition in question is subdoxastic, reliability (or something like it) of the move from Y to an experience of X appears to be enough to ground knowledge of X.

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25 Despite the disproportionate prominence of visual examples in the philosophical literature, our theorizing here, insofar as it is supposed to generalize, should take into account examples from a variety of perceptual systems.

26 Throughout this paragraph, I've made a number of assumptions about the nature of auditory properties. But I have done this for the sake of simplicity only, and I don't think the strength of the case relies on the truth of these controversial assumptions. See Casati & Dokic (2010) for discussion of many of the philosophical issues surrounding auditory perception and the nature of sounds.

27 If having an ability is a form of know-how, and, as some have argued (e.g. Vendler (1972), Stanley and Williamson (2001)), knowledge how is reducible to knowledge that, mustn't the ability to distinguish a piano from a guitar rely on some beliefs, even if implicit? (Thanks to Amir Arturo Castellanos and Nicole Dular for pointing out this possibility.) But even if these representational transitional states are in some sense beliefs, they won't be the sort of "moral bridge principle", reflectively accessible, beliefs that Faraci and others claim is required for moral perception. So while I think this possibility makes things a bit more complicated, I do believe that the response given in the text will be successful, even against the intellectualist about know-how. I set this worry aside in what follows, but the proponent of this sort of view can think of Thin BK as beliefs of a special sort throughout without, I think, any loss of force in the main thrust of the argument.

28 I want to remain as neutral as possible here on the nature of these subdoxastic states. Burge's (2010) notion of "formation laws", which are law-like regularities in the perceptual system to move from sensory input to perceptual representation, provide one helpful understanding of what's going on here. Burge (2010) argues that something like these subdoxastic states must exist in order to solve what's known in the psychological literature as the "underdetermination problem"—namely, the problem that the visual system somehow solves when moving from two-dimensional sensory data to representations of a three-dimensional world. (See, e.g., Bruce et. al. 2003, Ch. 7.)

A thin reading of *M*, then, is likely true. But to preserve the validity of the argument in light of this reading, we'll need to understand "background knowledge" in the thin way throughout. In particular, the conclusion becomes:

(*C\**) Therefore, in epistemically successful cases, moral perception is mediated by transitional and possibly subdoxastic states which reliably move from states which represent non-moral properties to states which represent moral properties.

The opponent of a purely perceptualist view shouldn't be satisfied with *C\**. The alleged problem for the pure perceptualist is that moral perceptions, when they are epistemically successful, can only ground moral knowledge because they depend on justified moral *beliefs*. The purely perceptualist view can't be right, the objector claims, because successful moral perception is epistemically dependent on previously held moral knowledge. *C\** doesn't support this claim. If the relevant mediating states are subdoxastic states, they won't be the sorts of things that require knowledge of "moral bridge principles" – or any propositional knowledge at all, for that matter – to generate successful moral experiences. *C\** is the strongest conclusion we can draw from Faraci's argument, given the required weakening of *M*. But *C\** is not incompatible with pure perceptualism. The purely perceptualist view is left standing.

#### 4 Thin BK and Access Internalism

Thin BK is subdoxastic information that can ground reliable transitions from perceptual information about some property *Y* to perceptual information about some other property *X*. Such information can in turn result in reliable perceptual experiences of *X*. I have argued that this is enough for these experiences of *X* to ground justified beliefs about *X*—in the case at hand, justified beliefs about the instantiation of moral properties.

However, all of this talk about generating reliable perceptual experiences may suggest that this response to Faraci will only succeed if we assume externalism about knowledge—the view that an agent can have knowledge that *P* even in the absence of knowing the basis for her belief that *P*.<sup>29</sup> In a footnote, Faraci makes a similar point:

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29 Thanks to Nicole Dular and Hille Paakkunainen for pointing this out, and two anonymous reviewers for pressing me to address this more explicitly than I originally had.

What I want to insist on ... is that in order for Norm's perception to ground *knowledge*, whatever explains the reliability of that perception must in some sense be *available* to him ... Of course, some—e.g. externalists or coherentists—might reject [this] requirement. But then Norm's is just the sort of case that is frequently used to challenge externalism: It seems implausible that an agent can know something when the reliability of his route to that knowledge is deeply mysterious (at least to him).<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, here Faraci seems to be conceding that externalist defenders of moral perception need not be concerned with his argument. If that's right, there appears to be a relatively easy way—even by Faraci's own lights—of defending the Purely Perceptualist view: just accept externalism about knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Now, I can't hope to adjudicate the longstanding dispute between externalism and internalism about knowledge within the context of this paper. So it would be a serious weakness of the argument above if its success hinged on the truth of externalism about knowledge. Fortunately for the Purely Perceptualist view, it doesn't, as I'll now argue.

There are many forms of internalism about knowledge.<sup>32</sup> But the strand of internalism that seems to be relevant here—that is, what might initially appear to be incompatible with Thin BK's ability to generate knowledge-conferring experiences—is Access Internalism. Access Internalism says, roughly, that in order to know *P*, an agent's grounds for believing *P* must be accessible to her via reflection.<sup>33</sup> So the thought is this: When Emily forms her belief that the cat's burning is *bad*, part of her ground for believing, on the Purely Perceptualist view, is some Thin BK (a transition from perceptual inputs about animals on fire to perceptual experiences as of *badness*, say). Since Thin BK isn't accessible to Emily upon reflection, and Thin BK grounds Emily's belief, she can't know that the cat's burning is bad, if Access Internalism is true. It appears, then, that the argument of section 3 can't succeed if Access Internalism is true.

But appearances are deceiving. Emily's belief that the cat's burning is bad is grounded, not in any Thin BK, but in her *perceptual experience* of the cat's burning being bad. It's not a mystery at all to Emily why she believes what she does: she believes that the cat's burning is bad because that's how things

30 Faraci (2015), 2058, n.13.

31 Star (2008) and Wielenberg (2014) are two such externalists about moral knowledge.

32 See, e.g., Bonjour (1985), Conee & Feldman (2001), Huemer (2001), Wedgwood (2002), and many others.

33 For an overview, see Pappas (2014), Section 2. Of course, this isn't to say that *all* it takes for knowledge that *P* is to know one's basis for believing *P*.

perceptually appear to her. Now, to be sure, there is a complicated story for perceptual scientists to tell us about why Emily has the perceptual experience that she does. And, if the Purely Perceptualist view is correct, part of this story will appeal to perceptual processes that have encoded moral or proto-moral information in the course of generating a perceptual experience. But none of these are incompatible with the claim that Emily's ground for belief is her experience. The fact that there is a complicated causal explanation for the existence of an agent's grounds for believing *P* does not entail that the complicated causal explanation is part of her grounds for believing *P*.

We can illustrate this by considering what the Access Internalist says about mundane cases of perceptual knowledge. Ma'sma believes that there's a green cup on the table (and her belief is true). If asked, she would (correctly) state that she believes it because she has a perceptual experience as of a cup on the table.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps there are other conditions on the etiology of the experience that must be met for it to be knowledge-conferring. Does Ma'sma herself need to have access to the explanation of the reliability of her perceptual experience in order to count as knowing that there is a cup on the table? She'd better hope not: she's no philosopher or evolutionary scientist. And access internalists should also hope not, lest their view entail ascribing knowledge to a select few epistemologists and scientists.

Rather, what the mundane perceptual case shows is that the requirement Faraci gestures toward—that in order to know that *P* we must have access to an explanation of the reliability of our belief-forming process(es)—is a condition on knowledge that even the most stringent access internalists should reject. The strongest plausible version of access internalism states that in order to know that *P*, we must have access to our grounds for believing *P*. These grounds must also provide genuine evidence that *P*, of course—but an agent need not be able to give an argument that this is so—that would be a skepticism entailing, and thus implausibly strong version of access internalism.

Return to the case of Emily's moral perceptual experience. Emily believes that the cat's burning is bad. And she can cite her moral perceptual experience that represents it so as her grounds for believing. So from the standpoint of access internalism, her situation is perfectly analogous to Ma'sma's. Emily is not reflectively aware of the Thin BK that contributes to causing her moral perceptual experience. But neither is Ma'sma aware of the Thin BK that transitions from the 2D information that hits her retina to her 3D representation of the cup on the table. To demand more from Emily but not from Ma'sma would

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34 Well, as I note in a moment, Ma'sma isn't a philosopher, so she would presumably explain the basis of her belief in a more straightforward way, such as "I see the cup!"

be special pleading. In short: Thin BK is not the sort of thing that needs to be accessed for knowledge, even on the strongest plausible version of access internalism. The argument of section 3 does not stand or fall with any particular position in the internalism/externalism debate.

## 5 A Remaining Regress Worry

Even assuming that what I've said above is correct, there remains a worry for pure perceptualism. We can see this by recapping one important piece of Faraci's argument. As Faraci points out, "[t]hose seeking to offer a purely perceptual moral epistemology would have to offer a purely perceptual epistemology for [the moral background knowledge]."<sup>35</sup> It's hard to see how the purely perceptualist view could do this without regress. Even if the moral information in question is Thin BK, the pure perceptualist owes an explanation as to where this Thin BK itself comes from.<sup>36</sup> Appealing to previous moral knowledge undermines the purity of the perceptualism in question. And appealing to earlier perceptual experiences of moral properties only pushes the problem back, since these earlier experiences would themselves require Thin BK. So it looks as though the pure perceptualist is committed to a regress, unless she posits innate moral Thin BK.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Faraci (2015), 2068–2069. Faraci talks of the relevant background knowledge in terms of “moral bridge principles”—principles which bridge the gap from descriptive information to normative information.

36 Whether this is what Faraci has in mind, an objection along these lines is given by Cowan (2014, Sect. 2). (Cowan's terminology for what I'm calling Pure Perceptualism is the “Intra-Perceptual Model”.)

37 On one reading, this objection is an instance of a debunking argument of the sort recently influential in metaethics (see Street (2006) and Joyce (2006)). While often cast in evolutionary terms, at their most basic, debunking arguments attempt to undermine claims to moral knowledge by showing that our moral belief-forming processes are not responsive to the moral facts (realistically construed). If our moral belief-forming processes are not responsive to the moral facts, then those processes' reliability would be utterly inexplicable.

Read this way, Faraci's objection is cause for concern. However, I cannot address this understanding of the objection here, for two reasons. First, responding to debunking arguments is no easy matter, and would require an entire separate paper. Second, this problem isn't peculiar to the purely perceptualist view. So this isn't an *additional* problem that the pure perceptualist must solve to show her view superior to *a priori* moral epistemology.

A complete answer to this concern requires a developed positive account of the mechanisms involved in moral perception. This positive account could be developed in two directions. *Simple Perceptualists* claim that moral properties are part of the contents of perceptual experience in the same way that, for example, tables and chairs are.<sup>38</sup> *Affective Perceptualists* claim that moral properties are presented, not within traditional sense modalities, but within emotional experience.<sup>39</sup> Here, I can only gesture toward how this might work.

Consider the variety of work that our perceptual systems do in helping us to find food, keeping us alive, allowing us to communicate with each other, and generally making life worth living.<sup>40</sup> Given this variety of purposes, our perceptual systems almost certainly not only have the ability to represent some predetermined set of innately developed concepts, but are likely able to flexibly generate new representations in unique ways.<sup>41</sup> So the only necessary precursor to a subdoxastic moral state would be a naturally occurring perceptual structure that could be molded – through perceptual feedback – into one that transitioned from non-moral representations to moral ones. An example of this might be the affective system and its ability to represent objects, people, and events as aversive or attractive.<sup>42</sup> Or perhaps the perceptual system alone has evolved to represent things in this way, in order to facilitate quick action. These representations might be called proto-moral in the sense that they could be molded into representations of moral content. Think again of the ordinary case of perceiving chairs. We presumably don't have an innate representation of chairs. Nor do we learn what chairs are by *a priori* reflection.<sup>43</sup> Rather, we have an ability to gain the ability to perceive chairs via a complicated feedback loop of reinforced and undermined perceptions of chair-like objects.

If the pure moral perceptualist can provide a plausible story somewhat like the story about chairs, she'll have rendered explicable the notion of a subdoxastic moral information state *without* appealing to prior moral beliefs. Again,

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38 I have been talking in terms of Simple Perceptualism throughout, since that is the way Faraci runs the argument. I think the dialectic will carry over analogously to Affective Perceptualism.

39 Of course, hybrid sorts of views are also possible.

40 With apologies to Schopenhauer.

41 This is an idea that Ruth Millikan emphasizes throughout her work, but for her original explanation of this idea see Millikan (1984), Pt.1. (I remain agnostic on the general biosemantics approach to content.)

42 I intend "attractive" here in the broader sense, not restricted to romantic or sexual attraction.

43 This isn't to say that *a priori* reflection couldn't reveal necessary and sufficient conditions for chair-hood. The claim is only that this reflection isn't required to have epistemically successful chair perceptions.

the affective system provides one potential mechanism to ground this developmental story.<sup>44</sup> Emily's perception of the burning cat may elicit non-moral to moral transitions in the affective system. Alternatively, Emily's affective system may mold her perceptual processing over time, encoding moral information into the perceptual system itself.<sup>45</sup> (Thus, even the Simple Perceptualist can make indirect use of the affective system in her positive account of how moral perception works.) Gibsonian "affordances" in the perceptual system – for example, perceiving that a chair as *to-be-sat-in* – provide another potential mechanism for generating Thin BK of moral information.<sup>46</sup> Both *Simple* and *Affective Perceptualists* can help themselves to either (or both) of these approaches.<sup>47</sup> Setting aside bigger picture evolutionary debunking concerns, and granting that the devil is in the details, these possibilities seem sufficient to undermine the inexplicability worry raised above.

## 6 Conclusion

Even if the perception of moral properties is possible – itself a contentious issue – we might wonder how much epistemically independent work moral perception could do within a broader moral epistemology. One line of concern against a purely perceptualist moral epistemology is that epistemically successful moral perception could only be possible with the assistance of substantive *a priori* moral knowledge. I have argued against this claim by focusing on the most sophisticated version of this objection from David Faraci (2015). Faraci argues that any successful moral perception would be mediated by prior knowledge of moral bridge principles. I have argued that this claim about mediation fails – the perceptual system alone, or perhaps with assistance from the affective system, can develop reliable mechanisms for detecting moral

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44 FitzPatrick (forthcoming) makes a similar point when discussing evolutionary debunking arguments more generally.

45 Compare Cowan's (2014, Section 2) "Hybrid" model.

46 The notion of a perceptual affordance—e.g., perceiving that a chair is *to-be-sat-in*—goes back to the work of psychologist James J. Gibson (1977). The idea has been extremely influential, but remains controversial. For a recent philosophical discussion of affordances, see Siegel (2014). Cowan (2014, 4) briefly mentions affordances as well in the context of grounding moral perceptions.

47 The Simple Perceptualist can, contrary to initial appearances, appeal to affect as part of her positive perceptualist story. That's because the affective system may influence the perceptual system and its ability to represent certain properties within perceptual experience. See, e.g. Phelps et al. (2006).

properties without moral propositional attitudes of the sort that would cast doubt on the purely perceptualist view.

Of course, questions about a purely perceptualist moral epistemology remain. In particular, a full defense of such a view would require a detailed account of the mechanisms of moral perception. This has not been provided above. But I hope to have cleared away at least one initial but serious objection to the pure perceptualist view.<sup>48</sup>

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48 I would like to thank Teresa Bruno, Nicole Dular, David Faraci, Nikki Fortier, Hille Paakunainen, David Sobel, and two anonymous referees for detailed comments on earlier versions of this paper. I'd also like to thank Sophie Ban, Dante Dauksz, Naomi Dershowitz, Ben Henke, C.J.K. Gibilisco, Byron Simmons, and the audience for the 2015 Syracuse Graduate Working Papers.

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