TOWARD A PERCEPTUAL SOLUTION TO EPISTEMOLOGICAL OBJECTIONS TO NONNATURALISM

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STANCE-INDEPENDENT nonnaturalist moral realism is subject to two related epistemological objections.[1] First, there is the metaethical descendant of the Benacerraf problem.[2] Second, there are evolutionary debunking arguments.[3] Standard attempts to solve these epistemological problems have not appealed to any particular moral epistemology. This makes sense: a response to these particular epistemic concerns that is otherwise epistemologically neutral is preferable to one only available to those willing to take on other epistemological commitments. On the other hand, the focus on these epistemologically neutral responses leaves many interesting theoretical stones unturned. Exploring the ability of particular theories in moral epistemology to handle these difficult epistemological objections can help illuminate strengths or weaknesses within these theories themselves, as well as opening up potentially unexplored avenues for responding to deeply entrenched concerns about our epistemic access to the moral properties.

This paper is a case study in the latter kind of project. I assess the prospects of a perceptualist model of moral knowledge for responding to epistemological arguments against non-skeptical moral realism. I argue that *Moral Perceptualism* (MP), as I will call it, has powerful responses to these objections that are not available to other moral epistemologists. Furthermore, the

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1   Shafer-Landau defines *stance independence* as the claim that "the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective" (*Moral Realism*, 15). "Nonnaturalism" is also subject to different understandings. I will not define "nonnaturalism" precisely for the purposes of this paper, except to say that on a nonnaturalist view, the moral facts are not identical or reducible to natural facts. (This conflicts with the epistemological characterization of "nonnaturalism" that Shafer-Landau favors.)

2   Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth."

3   The two most famous examples of evolutionary debunking arguments are those of Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, ch. 4, and *The Evolution of Morality*; and Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value."

uniquely perceptualist responses are arguably *more* compelling than other approaches to the epistemic objections that have cropped up in the literature. The upshot is that *if* some version of MP is correct, then the realist has less to fear from Benacerraf and evolutionary debunking–style epistemological objections. Insofar as one is already a committed realist, then, this provides some indirect support for MP.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 1, I discuss two important—and what I take to be the two most powerful—ways of understanding the epistemic constraint that nonnaturalists' moral beliefs cannot meet. After a brief overview of MP in section 2, in section 3, I clarify and consider the claim that nonnaturalists cannot explain our *epistemic access* to nonnatural facts. I argue that MP can meet the epistemic access constraint in a way that appears unavailable to traditional *a priori* nonnaturalist moral epistemologies. This requires a slight digression to discuss the causal nature of perceptual experience. In section 4, I consider a second way of understanding the epistemological objection to nonnaturalism—the idea that nonnaturalists cannot illustrate an *explanatory connection* between our moral beliefs and nonnatural facts. Here again I claim that the proponent of MP is better placed to meet the challenge than its *a priori* counterparts. Finally, in section 5, I sum up what I take myself to have shown.

1. EPISTEMIC PRINCIPLES BEHIND SKEPTICISM ABOUT NONNATURAL NORMATIVE FACTS

Most philosophers agree that there is something epistemically questionable about nonnatural moral knowledge, given the genealogy of our moral beliefs and the metaphysical status of those facts. These facts are alleged to undercut some necessary condition on the possibility of knowledge about some domain. Just what is this necessary condition? Different authors have proposed different ideas. Here are what I take to be the two most powerful:

> *Epistemic Access*: In order for our beliefs about some domain *D* to constitute knowledge, we must have epistemic access to the *D*-facts.[4]

> *Explanatory Connection*: In order for a belief *B* to constitute knowledge that *P*, *P* must play an ineliminable role in an explanation about why *B* exists.[5]

4   Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth" (on one reading); and Timmons, "On the Epistemic Status of Considered Moral Judgments."

5   See Jenkins, "The Analysis of Knowledge"; Woods, "Mathematics, Morality, and Self-Effacement"; and Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology."

These two principles are a long way from exhausting the possibilities.[6] My claim, which I will not defend here, is that these principles represent two of the most powerful yet non-question-begging grounds for raising skeptical worries about nonnaturalist normative realism. Both of them can be met in the case of epistemically uncontroversial domains such as knowledge of ordinary objects and scientific knowledge, but not in the case of moral facts if those facts are construed nonnaturalistically. The key here is to find a principle that genuinely puts nonnaturalist moral knowledge in doubt without overgeneralizing to something more closely resembling a global skepticism. And of course, the principle should itself be a plausible, independently motivated constraint on knowledge of some domain.

Before turning to a discussion of why and how a perceptualist moral epistemology can meet these two principles, a brief explication of MP (as I will understand it) is necessary.

2. MORAL PERCEPTUALISM: AN OUTLINE

MP, as I will use the notion here, consists of two substantive claims. First, MP is a version of *Ethical Foundationalism* (EF).

EF: Most ethical agents have at least some non-inferentially justified first-order ethical beliefs.

As stated, EF is just the claim that foundationalism—understood in the epistemologist's sense—is true of the structure of at least some ethical beliefs, and that some ethical beliefs are members of the set of foundational beliefs. However, EF does not entail that the non-inferentially justified ethical beliefs are grounded in *intuitions*, whatever those turn out to be.

The second claim that constitutes MP is *Ethical Empiricism* (EE):

EE: The non-inferential justification of first-order ethical beliefs is grounded in perceptual experiences that represent the instantiation of evaluative properties.

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6   Two other principles often raised in this context have to do with whether the nonnaturalist can explain our reliability with respect to the moral facts. On one reading, the claim is that nonnaturalists cannot explain our actual reliability in a non-question-begging way (see, e.g., Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"). On another reading, the claim is that nonnaturalists cannot explain how we could possibly be reliable with respect to the nonnatural facts (see Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*). I think that others have convincingly argued that neither of these principles will make for a powerful but non-question-begging challenge to nonnaturalism, so I will not discuss them in detail here. For discussion, see Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"; Jonas, "Access Problems and Explanatory Overkill"; and Baras, "Our Reliability Is in Principle Explainable."

EE says that non-inferentially justified ethical beliefs are justified in the same way as other perceptual justification. The basic picture is as follows. Under certain circumstances, evaluative properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. Furthermore, at least sometimes, the evaluative properties that figure in the contents of perceptual experience can provide non-inferential justification for beliefs about the instantiation of evaluative properties. This is compatible with the claim that sometimes evaluative perceptual experiences fail to non-inferentially justify. First, there may be defeaters for the justification that an evaluative perceptual experience would otherwise provide. Second, some evaluative perceptual experiences may be epistemically dependent in the sense that they cannot provide justificatory force independently of some prior justified evaluative belief. MP only claims that, in at least some circumstances, neither of these things holds. When they do not, an evaluative perceptual experience can ground a non-inferentially justified moral belief.[7]

3. EPISTEMIC ACCESS AND MP

3.1. What Is Epistemic Access?

Let us turn now to epistemic access. One worry is that epistemic access is itself a technical notion that is often not given further characterization. A complete analysis of the notion of "epistemic access" cannot be given here. But let me say a little bit about the general idea. Epistemic access, as I understand it, involves establishing that some (metaphysical) relation holds between the D-beliefs and the D-facts that can ground positive epistemic status. Epistemic access is both weaker and stronger than a notion such as reliability. It is weaker because it does not require accuracy—an epistemic access relation can hold without a majority of beliefs being true. But it is stronger because it requires some such relation to hold; even beliefs that are reliably true (because for example their contents are necessary) may not meet an epistemic access condition. Finally, note that the sort of relation that underwrites epistemic access need not be causal. Consider a few noncausal examples.[8]

> *Introspective Access*: Though the reliability of introspection has been questioned, it is plausible that we have some special access to our own mental states, however fallible it may be.[9] I take it that even though

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7   It is perhaps worth noting that MP is compatible with a number of views on the metaphysics of moral properties, as well as with a number of views in normative ethics.

8   None of these are going to be completely uncontroversial; they are only meant to be illustrative.

9   See, e.g., Schwitzgebel, "Introspection," sec. 4.

introspection involves underlying causal brain processes, it is from an epistemic standpoint a different kind of access than causal access.[10] On a traditional sort of model of introspection, our introspective beliefs are responsive to the facts they are about via a relationship of direct acquaintance.

Conceptual Access: A certain philosophical school of thought claims that we can learn a lot about the concepts we possess competently by conceptual analysis, which may involve reflecting on how we would apply them in various scenarios.[11] This is one potential explanation and defense of analytic knowledge (assuming that there are analytic truths).[12] Again, though this kind of *a priori* reflection would be underwritten by causal (and possibly also introspective) processes, the *access* in question is not causal or introspective, because of the nature of the truths in question. On this view, analytic truths are not causally related to us, nor are they merely facts about our own mental states.[13]

Constitutive Access: We have constitutive access to a truth *t* when something about our coming to believe *t* is partially constitutive or provides evidence for what is partially constitutive of its being the case that *t*. Arguably, many beliefs about response-dependent properties involve constitutive access.[14] Suppose that something is beautiful iff it is believed to be beautiful by all/many/some normal adult human beings.[15] A normal adult human being comes across a Chuck Close painting and comes to believe that it is beautiful. She has constitutive

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10 I do not want to take a stand on whether, or to what extent, introspection should be subsumed under the category of causal access. I include it in the list because it seems to have been thought to be epistemically distinct in some special way by many philosophers, and my intention here is only to give a list of possibly different forms of epistemic access. See Schwitzgebel, "Introspection."

11 Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* and "Locke-ing onto Content"; Audi, "Skepticism about A Priori Justification"; Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*.

12 Robert Audi, for example, believes that at least some substantive moral knowledge is conceptual, in the sense that the wrongness of certain actions is "contained in" the moral concepts alone. See *The Good in the Right* and "Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics."

13 For a book-length defense of analyticity, see Russell, *Truth in Virtue of Meaning*.

14 As with introspection, I do not intend to take a stand on the epistemology of response-dependent properties. My intention here is only to give a list of possibly different forms of epistemic access.

15 There are many complications I am ignoring here, not the least of which is how to define "normal" in a noncircular way.

access to the fact that the painting is beautiful insofar as her belief is partially constitutive of that fact.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. What is important here is that bearing the kind of substantive relation that can meet *epistemic access* involves a plurality of options, but that this requires more than coincidental accuracy.

3.2 *Epistemic Access and* MP

I now turn to considering whether MP is better equipped to meet the epistemic access challenge. I argue that it is, although there remain some wrinkles to be ironed out. It may initially seem like the proponent of MP has a simple but complete answer: our access is perceptual. We perceive the nonnatural moral facts and, after all, there is nothing implausible about claiming that perception can provide access to mind-independent properties. So, according to MP, the nonnatural facts are epistemically accessible.

This response may sound too good to be true. While it is true that, according to MP, our access to the nonnatural facts is perceptual, just how this is possible is much more unclear than it is in the case of tables, cats, or shapes.[16] This is because, unlike tables, cats, and shapes, the nonnatural properties are widely thought to be noncausal. It seems as though the quick and dirty response given above just pushes the problem of epistemic access back a step. The skeptic can now ask: How could we have perceptual access to a causally inefficacious property, when perception is essentially a causal relationship?[17]

The proponent of MP could deny that perception is essentially causal, but without further motivation, this would appear *ad hoc*. She could also deny that nonnatural properties are causally inefficacious, but that would raise its own problems.[18] It might seem that these two options, both unpalatable, are the only routes available for the proponent of MP. And so it may look as if, initial appearances aside, MP is not well placed to provide an adequate account of our epistemic access to the nonnatural properties.

What we have, then, is a seemingly inconsistent triad:

Causally Inefficacious (CI): Nonnatural moral properties are causally inefficacious.

Perceptual Access (PA): We have epistemic access to nonnatural moral properties through perception.

16 Schroeder raises a similar worry for the view that desires are appearances of the good ("How Does the Good Appear to Us?" sec. 4).

17 See McGrath, "Causation By Omission."

18 For this strategy, see Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire*.

Causal Condition on Perception (CCP): Perception is an essentially causal relation.

As we have just seen, we should be reluctant to give up either CI or CCP. Rejecting PA appears to be the only option left. But this is not right. Contrary to initial appearances, the triad above is not inconsistent. We can simultaneously accept CI, CCP, *and* PA—or so I presently argue.

The appearance of inconsistency arises because perception is essentially causal, while nonnatural properties are noncausal. However, once we focus on what precisely CCP says (and does not say), it becomes clear that CCP is actually compatible with moral perception, and thus compatible with PA, even if the moral properties are noncausal. To see this, notice that the proponent of MP need not—and in fact *should not*—deny that moral perception is causal. If Norma perceives that Tibbles's being lit on fire is bad, and this perception is not hallucinatory, she surely must stand in some causal relation to Tibbles. Thus, Norma's perception is essentially causal; CCP is met. And yet her perceptual experience represents *badness*, a causally inefficacious property; so we have not given up CI either.

Sarah McGrath, a moral perceptualist of a sort, has bolstered this claim by a kind of partners in innocence argument.[19] Imagine a non-skeptical Humean about perception, who argues that we cannot visually perceive anything other than two-dimensional color splotches. What should such a theorist say about our knowledge of trees, tables, and chairs? If she does not want to fall into skepticism, she has to say one of two things. Either our knowledge of these objects is somehow *a priori*, or we can gain perceptual knowledge of things even if we do not perceptually experience them. Since the former idea is absurd ("there is a tree in this room" is surely not *a priori*), we should think we can gain perceptual knowledge without perceptual experience. But then the moral epistemologist can say the same thing about moral knowledge, and such a move is not at all *ad hoc*.

I think McGrath is onto something here, but there are a couple of things that necessitate further discussion of this point. First, McGrath's view is that we can gain non-inferential moral knowledge on the basis of perception *despite* the fact that we cannot have perceptual experiences with moral content. And this feature of her view is a requirement for her response to this objection to work. This conflicts with my reading of MP discussed in section 2. Second, there may be a reasonable fear here that there is some faulty philosophy of perception going on in the background—how could we have non-inferential moral knowledge

19 McGrath is a moral perceptualist in an important sense—she thinks that moral beliefs can be justified on the basis of perceptual experience alone. However, unlike the "moral perceptualism" defended in this paper, McGrath rejects the idea that moral properties are part of the content of perceptual experience. See McGrath, "Moral Perception and its Rivals."

from wholly nonmoral content without some bridge principle? I have some sympathy for this cautiousness. So it is worth a small digression to say a bit about the underlying philosophy of perception issues going on beneath the surface. Once they are brought out, it becomes clear that even the proponent of MP in my preferred sense can allow for moral experiences compatible with CCP and CI.

3.3. Interlude: Just What Is Essentially Causal about Perception?

There is a vast literature in the philosophy of perception concerning what properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. Call *Conservatism* the view that only low-level properties—such as shapes, colors, and tones—are represented. Call *Liberalism* the view that some high-level properties—such as natural kinds, artifacts, and relations—can also be represented. Conservatives and liberals disagree about what properties feature in perceptual experience, but they widely agree that perception is an essentially causal relationship.[20]

I cannot adjudicate the conservative/liberal dispute here. But it seems safe to assume that MP is only going to be even initially plausible to liberals. Assuming that moral properties are high-level properties, conservatives are going to reject MP from the get-go. In what follows, I assess how best to understand the essentially causal nature of perception from within a liberal framework. In the bigger picture, this is a contentious assumption. But since proponents of MP are already committed to liberalism, it is a safe assumption to make in this context. The idea, then, is to home in on the essentially causal nature of perception by considering some causally unique cases of properties thought to be perceivable by liberals about perceptual experience.

Consider one natural way to understand the causal constraint on perception:

Strict CC: Necessarily, if a property F is part of the contents of S's perceptual experience e, then F (or the fact that F is instantiated) is at least partially causally responsible for e.

Strict CC is a relatively robust causal constraint on perceptual representation. But it is also an initially intuitive way of characterizing the causal nature of perception in a precise way. Nevertheless, I now argue that Strict CC should be rejected by liberals about perceptual experience. I will argue this by considering three sorts of properties that liberals have defended as perceivable that could not be, if Strict CC were true: absences, Gibsonian affordances, and the mental states of others. I consider each in turn.

Many liberals have recently argued that perceptual experience extends beyond the representation of positive properties to the representation of what we

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20   Though not universally—see Snowdon, "Perception, Vision, and Causation."

can call *absence properties.* For example, you may perceive a gap in an otherwise predictable pattern of coins arranged on a table, the holes in a slice of Swiss cheese, darkness inside a cave, or the sound of silence.[21] Suppose that these liberals are right—that we do perceive at least some absence properties. It is unclear whether this is compatible with Strict cc, since it is unclear that the *lack* of something can figure in a genuine causal relationship. It is plausible that silence, for example, does not involve the existence of some causal property, but rather the lack of any causally efficacious property of a certain sort. So, while it is not uncontentious, the perception of absence properties does provide some *prima facie* reason to favor a less robust causal constraint on perception than Strict cc.

A second set of properties that appears to conflict with Strict cc includes what I will call *affordance properties.* The idea of affordances in perceptual experience goes back to the psychological research of James J. Gibson, but it has also been the subject of quite a bit of recent work in the philosophy of perception.[22] In Gibson's words, affordances are properties that tell an animal what an environment "*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill."[23] Others—both philosophers and psychologists—following in Gibson's footsteps have attempted to refine the idea of affordance properties in various ways.[24] But paradigmatic instances of affordance properties should illustrate the idea clearly enough for present purposes. For example, an animal's prey may be seen as *to-be-killed*, a cup as *able-to-be-picked-up*, and the liquid in the cup as *drinkable*.[25] In brief, affordance properties relate agents and their abilities to the environment. They represent something like potential actions.

Though affordance properties are surely grounded in causal properties (for example, the structure of the cup grounds or constitutes its ability to be picked up), they are arguably not themselves causal. However, according to at least many

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21 See, respectively, Farennikova, "Perception of Absence and Penetration from Expectation," 2; Casati and Varzi, *Holes and Other Superficialities*, 156–58; Sorensen, *Seeing Dark Things*, chs. 10, 14, and "Hearing Silence"; Soteriou, "The Perception of Absence, Space, and Time"; Phillips, "Hearing and Hallucinating Silence"; and Simon and Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence."

22 Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," and *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*; Chemero, "An Outline of a Theory of Affordances"; Prosser, "Affordances and Phenomenal Character in Spatial Perception"; Nanay, "Action-Oriented Perception"; and Siegel, "Affordances and the Contents of Perception."

23 Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 127.

24 See, e.g., Reed, *Encountering the World*; and Chemero, "An Outline of a Theory of Affordances."

25 Affordance properties appear, then, to come in two levels of strength—some features of objects render things possible, while others render things as appearing (practically) necessary. For discussion of this point, see Siegel, "Affordances and the Contents of Perception."

psychologists and philosophers, affordance properties are perceivable.[26] Insofar as this is right, it casts doubt on Strict CC, since the perception of affordance properties is incompatible with it. In short, affordance properties give us further reason to favor a less robust causal constraint on perception than Strict CC.

Finally, consider perception of the mental states of others. Many philosophers of perception and mind have recently argued that we can literally perceive the affective states of others.[27] Rowland Stout, for example, argues that we can "literally perceive someone's anger" in the sense that this perception is non-inferential.[28] The causal efficacy of mental states is one of the thorniest issues in philosophy. But, as far as I know, no one arguing against the perception of mental states has claimed that the perception of these states hinged on this controversy. Appeals in favor of the claim that we can perceive these states are generally phenomenological and empirical (appealing to modules in the brain dedicated to "mindreading"), not to the causal efficacy of these states. So it seems as though at least many liberals should be friendly to the perception of the mental states of others, regardless of their direct causal efficacy.

If a broadly liberal view of perceptual content is correct, it seems like Strict CC is not the right way to understand the causal constraint on perception. However, given the consensus that there is some causal constraint on perception, some weaker constraint must hold. Unfortunately, without taking controversial stands on the cases above (and others), a full account cannot be explicated and defended here. However, if any of the properties discussed above are perceivable, something *at least as* weak as the following must hold:

> *Weak CC*: Necessarily, if a property F is part of the contents of S's perceptual experience e, then either (a) F or (b) some property (or set of properties) G that perceptually grounds F is at least partially causally responsible for e.[29]

Depending on what one says about the cases above, Weak CC may remain too strong to be an accurate causal constraint on perception. And notice also that

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26 This claim is far from uncontentious. But so far as I know, no one has rejected the perceivability of affordances on the grounds that they are not causal.

27 See, e.g., Green, "Perceiving Emotions;" Stout, "Seeing the Anger in Someone's Face"; and McNeill, "On Seeing That Someone Is Angry."

28 Stout, "Seeing the Anger in Someone's Face," 29.

29 By "perceptually ground" here, I mean the low-level perceptual properties upon which the high-level perceptual property is perceived. For example, a perceptual experience of a table is perceptually grounded in the perceptual representation of shades of brown, edges, etc. Of course, a complete theory of perceptual grounding would require more to be said, but this lies far outside the scope of this paper.

Weak CC is a necessary but not sufficient condition for perceptual eligibility. I hope to have established that the liberal about perceptual experience should favor something at least as weak as Weak CC, independent of any consideration of the perception of moral properties.

We have now seen that this attempt to single out moral properties using the causal constraint on perception is not so simple. The perception of causally inefficacious properties is compatible with the causal constraint on perception, properly construed, as long as those properties are related to causally efficacious properties in the right sort of way. Given some plausible causal constraints on perception, nonnatural properties will be perceivable after all.[30] Given that perceptual access is paradigmatically epistemic access, epistemic access to moral properties is possible if we endorse MP.

4. MORAL PERCEPTUALISM AND EXPLANATORY CONNECTIONS TO THE FACTS

4.1. How to Think about Explanatory Connections

The second potential condition on nonnatural justification or knowledge that I want to consider has to do with another kind of connection between our moral beliefs and the moral facts. According to this principle, if our moral beliefs are to constitute knowledge, the (nonnatural) moral facts must play a role in an explanation about why we have them. Compare this principle to another epistemic principle raised against nonnaturalism in this context:

> Explanation of Reliability (ER): If we have no explanation of the reliability of our beliefs about some domain D, our justification for beliefs about D is defeated.[31]

For reasons that others have raised, I think this understanding of the challenge is misguided.[32] In any case, if this is the strongest plausible challenge that can

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30 There is a deep non-epistemological problem lurking in the background here: not only does the moral realist need to establish that we can in principle perceptually represent noncausal properties, but she will also need to provide a theory of the fixing of perceptual content that does not require a causal connection between the representation and the property represented. Defending a moral realist friendly theory of content fixing is a nontrivial task, and I cannot hope to achieve that task here. But for some approaches that seem promising, see Werner, "Getting a Moral Thing into a Thought"; and Schroeter and Schroeter, "The Generalized Integration Challenge in Metaethics." Thanks to Bar Luzon for helping me see how important this issue is.

31 For readings about the epistemological objections to nonnaturalism along these lines, see Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"; Crow, "The Mystery of Moral Perception," 19–21; and Schecter, "Is there a reliability problem for logic?," Section 6.

32 Jonas, "Access Problems and Explanatory Overkill."

be raised against nonnaturalist epistemology, then nonnaturalists have nothing to fear from the debunker.[33] However, I raise this principle here merely to distinguish *Explanatory Connections* (EC) from it. EC is in one sense easier and in one sense more difficult to meet than ER. EC is easier to meet because a belief can in principle be explanatorily connected to a fact without being reliable.[34] On the other hand, EC is harder to meet because reliability alone, even explained reliability, does not guarantee an explanatory connection. This is because someone could have a belief forming method that is coincidentally and robustly reliable without having anything to do with the domain itself. Consider some method that reliably results in a belief that *P*, where *P* is some necessary truth. The method could be totally arbitrary and have nothing to do with *P*, but we would still have an explanation of reliability. The belief would not, though, meet EC.

So how can EC be met, if not merely by reliability? Something like this principle has been most recently and powerfully defended by Matthew Lutz.[35] After pointing out that a causal constraint on knowledge is subject to several counterexamples, Lutz explains:

> This is why [EC] does not refer to *causal* connections but rather to *explanatory* connections. . . . If we reject the notion of a "final cause" as being genuinely explanatory—as is common, post-Darwin—we can identify three different kinds of explanatory relations: formal explanation, material explanation, and causal explanation. . . . The statue exists *because* the lump exists, in the form of a statue. The window breaks *because* I threw the rock.[36]

As Lutz here points out, EC can be met by noncausal factors. For example, constitutive explanations can connect two facts, such as the connection between the statue's existence being explained by the lump's existing in a particular form. The strength of the stone can be explained by its material composition. And of course there may be other explanatory connections as well. What is important here is that the EC condition is not a causal condition in disguise.

Elsewhere, Lutz provides a more general theory as to the kind of EC that fits best with a set of beliefs about some domain. I do not want to take a stand here

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33   Clarke-Doane, "Debunking and Dispensability," ch. 6. See also Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*.

34   If this seems unacceptably weak, not to worry; see the discussion of "Well-Explained Belief" below. My aim in section 4.2 is to show that MP can meet even the stronger condition of Well-Explained Belief.

35   Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology."

36   Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology," 303.

on whether this is the precisely correct understanding of EC, but it will be useful to have the concept of a *Well-Explained* belief for what follows. As Lutz argues,

> S's belief that P is Well-Explained if and only if S's belief that P is the product of a reliable belief-forming method, M, and there is an explanatory connection between the fact that S is using M and the fact that M is reliable.[37]

Is showing that a set of beliefs about some domain are Well-Explained necessary for meeting EC, and thus necessary for responding to the skeptic about nonnaturalism? One complication here is that being Well-Explained could be a condition on knowledge, but nonetheless the burden rests on the skeptic to show that this condition *could not* be met, rather than on the non-skeptic to show that it in fact is. Consider raising a skeptical worry about vision against a philosopher living in a time before vision was well-understood. It would be unfair to demand that she must give a story about why our visual beliefs are Well-Explained in order for her to go on trusting her vision. It just needs to be the case that there *is* an explanation that connects our method *M* and facts in the domain in question; we do not need to understand or grasp that explanatory connection, even as theorists. Put another way, a belief's being Well-Explained is an externalist condition that needs to be met for a domain to be non-skeptical, not an internalist one. It can be met without our grasp of an explanation as to how, compatible with the rejection of skepticism.

However, the concept of a belief's being Well-Explained can still be useful for assessing EC. If we have reason to think that our beliefs about some domain could not, even in principle, be Well-Explained, that would cast serious doubt on a non-skeptical account of that domain. A plausible story about our (nonnatural) moral beliefs being Well-Explained would defang an epistemological argument against nonnaturalism based in EC. To reiterate, I am not claiming that beliefs about some domain need to be Well-Explained in order to meet EC; instead, I am claiming that being Well-Explained, since it is a particular way of providing an explanatory connection between beliefs and the facts they are about, is sufficient for meeting EC.

In any case, my purpose here also is not to defend EC as a necessary (or sufficient) condition on knowledge. So even if *a priori* moral epistemologies cannot meet the condition, they could defend their epistemic credentials by arguing that the view is false. But let us set that possibility aside and from here forward assume that something like EC is true. If it is at least plausible, and MP is in better standing than its *a priori* rivals, that would provide some reason to

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37   Lutz, "The Case for Moral Skepticism," 68.

favor MP, other things being equal. So let us turn to a consideration of how MP can meet this condition.

4.2. *Explanatory Connection and Moral Perception*

Consider first the story about how EC will be met for ordinary, boring perceptual beliefs. Norma has the belief that there is a book on the desk. Her belief was caused by her visual experience of a book being on the desk. Norma's belief is well-explained: her belief is the product of a reliable belief-forming method (visual experience) and there is an explanatory connection between her use of visual experience and the holding of the facts that she is experiencing. She accepts her visual experience in this case (implicitly) because it has a long history of getting things right. Put another way, if she were in conditions in which she had often found her visual experience had gotten things wrong in the past, then she would have been more hesitant to form a belief on the basis of her visual experience. So there is a correlation between Norma's willingness to form beliefs on the basis of her visual experience and the facts that she is visually experiencing. She believes *because* of the facts in question. EC is met.

Now turn to the moral case. Suppose Norma has the belief that *the cat's suffering is bad*. And suppose furthermore, in accordance with MP, that her belief is based off of a visual experience of a cat on fire. The relevant question here is whether there is an explanatory connection between the fact that Norma trusts her visual experience and her visual experience's reliability. Initially, at least, it appears that the answer is yes, for the same reason as above. As long as Norma is a responsible moral agent, she will not trust her visual experience in poor visual conditions, or conditions in which her perception of moral properties may be unreliable. So, as with above, there may be a correlation between Norma's willingness to form (moral) beliefs on the basis of her visual experience and the accuracy of her visual experience. It looks like EC is met.

This is too quick. It is too simplistic to think of a belief-forming process such as visual experience as reliable or unreliable *simpliciter*. The reliability or unreliability of a particular belief-forming process depends not just on the process, but on the process relative to the domain in question. For example, an electromagnetic field (EMF) meter is reliable with respect to the detection of an EMF, but it would be silly to infer from this that ghost hunters are forming reliable beliefs when they take EMF meters to convey information about the presence of ghosts. An EMF meter is a reliable method for the domain of EMF information, but unreliable for the domain of ghost information.[38] Similarly,

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38 The example comes from Gibilisco, "Theories of Properties and Ontological Theory-Choice," 107–8. Thanks to Christopher Gibilisco for pressing me on this point. For an early statement of this idea, see Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, sec. 3.1.

the debunker can claim that visual experience is reliable with respect to note-book information, but unreliable with respect to moral information. Or, to state this more carefully, since the debunker wants to remain neutral on the question of reliability: there is an explanatory connection between perceptual beliefs about notebooks and the reliability of perceptual experience of notebooks, but no such explanatory connection between perceptual beliefs about moral properties and the reliability of perceptual experience of moral properties.[39]

Before responding to this worry, let us get clear about exactly what the defender of an anti-skeptical MP owes the debunker. The debunker cannot demand process-independent proof of the reliability of perceptual experience for detecting moral properties. Such a requirement would lead to a near-univer-sal skepticism, not just about morality, but about all perceptual beliefs. So here the debunker must be making a more restricted claim, that, *even assuming* the reliability of perceptual experience with respect to detecting moral properties, it will still be the case that there is no explanatory connection between perception's reliability and our tendency to trust it on moral matters. In the ordinary boring case of perceptual belief, we have a long evolutionary story about why human beings and other animals' trust of perceptual experiences of ordinary objects selects for accuracy. Not so for moral perceptual experiences. Even if such expe-riences are reliable, they were not selected for their accuracy. So there is a deep explanatory connection in the ordinary object case between the reliability of the method and our use of it. No such connection exists in the moral case.

To address this, it will help to make use of a distinction first incorporated in the metaethics literature by Andreas Mogensen—the distinction between *proximate* and *ultimate* explanations.[40] A proximate explanation is an explana-tion of why some particular individual has some trait by way of appealing to their particular life history, while an ultimate explanation appeals to a species' evolutionary history. As Mogensen stresses, these explanations are not com-peting, but complementary:

> Imagine that insects in one species, S1, have a certain pattern of colour-ation that serves as camouflage: it resembles the surrounding foliage. Nat-ural selection has favoured this pattern of colouration because it allows the insects to avoid predators. Suppose the pattern of colouration arises because juveniles eat a certain kind of moss during a critical develop-ment period. However, the fact that the juveniles have this diet is irrel-evant in explaining why having this kind of colouration confers greater

39   Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism."
40   The distinction is originally from Mayr, "Darwin's Biological Work."

relative fitness: the colouration would be equally advantageous if it came about as a result of a different set of developmental factors.[41]

Notice that the proximate/ultimate distinction here illustrates that explanatory connections can hold even when there is no deep evolutionary story about why a particular process is reliable. There is an explanatory connection between the food that a juvenile S_1 eats and their pattern of coloration, despite the fact that, from an evolutionary standpoint, the fact that this particular mechanism of generating the coloration rather than some other is a coincidence. And it should be flagged that this proximate conception of an explanation is intuitively enough to meet the EC constraint as well. Even though evolution does not select for agents who can engage in chemistry, for example, this does not undermine the claim that there is an explanatory connection between a chemist and their chemistry beliefs.[42] Requiring a deep evolutionary explanatory connection, or at least a direct one, between any set of beliefs about a domain and the reliability of the process that underwrites those beliefs would commit the debunkers to an overgeneralization of their arguments to any domain of beliefs that lack a cognitive mechanism directly evolutionarily selected for.[43]

With all of this said, what matters for the proponent of perceptual moral knowledge is that there is at least a proximate explanatory connection between the reliability of moral perceptual experience and its use in forming moral beliefs. MP claims that perceptual experience can represent moral properties. There are relevant and vexed questions here about how representational content gets fixed. I cannot hope to even begin to scratch the surface here.[44] But what can be said is this: on at least many plausible theories of how representational content gets fixed, the content-fixing relation will guarantee an explanatory connection between a property *F* and perceptual representations of *F*. And that will in turn provide an explanatory connection between the fact that a subject is forming beliefs on the basis of perceptual representations of *F* and the reliability of the method:

Badness ⇒ Representation of badness ⇒ Reliability of belief-forming method

41 Mogensen, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Proximate/Ultimate Distinction," 198.

42 Street made this point in her very influential paper on evolutionary debunking ("A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," sec. 8).

43 For similar (and more developed) thoughts here, see FitzPatrick, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism."

44 For discussion, see Suikkanen, "Non-Naturalism and Reference"; Dunaway, Reality and Morality; and Werner, "Getting a Moral Thing into a Thought."

The arrows here represent explanatory connections. The idea is this: suppose that forming moral beliefs on the basis of perceptual moral experiences is reliable. Furthermore, suppose that our representations of *badness* are explained in terms of their content-fixing connection to the property of *badness*. The method's use is then explanatorily connected to its reliability in virtue of the fact that, without an explanatory connection to *badness*, the method would not be carried out in the first place.

Of course, even this response on behalf of the proponent of MP is contentious. It depends on deep and difficult questions about metasemantics that I cannot hope to answer here.[45] Such an approach may turn out to fail once an adequate metasemantics for moral content is developed. I think proponents of MP should be honest about this—this may be the best hope that nonnaturalists have of meeting the EC constraint. And it seems, at least initially, to be more amenable to a perceptual, *a posteriori* moral epistemology than an *a priori* one.

4.3. A Conceptual Competence–Based Explanatory Connection?

It is worth saying a bit about why the structure of providing an explanatory connection just given is not available to one recently influential *a priori* theory of moral epistemology—what I call the *conceptual competence* strategy.[46] This strategy manifests in different ways, but they all share a common commitment to the idea that (a) normal human individuals have a competent grasp of normative concepts, and (b) this grasp entails at least some moral knowledge. Some authors also appeal to self-evidence as having a role to play in explaining how conceptual competence guarantees moral knowledge.[47] Some proponents of this strategy assume a psychological theory of concepts, while others a Fregean

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45 In the interest of intellectual honesty, I will note that I have attempted to give a metasemantic picture for nonnaturalists (Werner, "Getting a Moral Thing into a Thought"). Because that view attempts to partially reduce the metasemantic story for ethical concepts to an epistemic relation, it is unclear whether it is compatible with the solution given here. Things will get complicated here, but I hope to provide a resolution to the seeming paradox in future work. In any case, anyone who rejects the account given in that paper can accept the account given here (or vice versa).

46 Perhaps the most popular attempt to rebut epistemological objections to moral realism is to appeal to third-factor explanations (Enoch, "Taking Morality Seriously"; Wielenberg, "On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality"; Skarsaune, "Darwin and Moral Realism"). Whatever other advantages and disadvantages such an approach may have, it does not even attempt to meet EC. Instead, proponents of third-factor explanations should argue directly against EC as a legitimate epistemic constraint. For discussion of related points, see Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses to Moral Debunking Arguments"; and Killoren, "An Occationalist Response to Korman and Locke."

47 See, e.g., Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 15; and Audi, "Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics."

view.[48] For present purposes, these (important!) differences between distinct versions of the view can be set aside.

The relevant difference here between all versions of the conceptual competence view and MP is that, according to MP, but not the conceptual competence view, the representation of *badness* is (proximally) explained by *badness* itself. On the conceptual competence view, the representation of *badness* comes first, and through reflection on that (conceptual) representation, it latches onto the stance-independent property of *badness.* So it appears, at least initially, as though providing an explanatory connection between *badness* and the representation of *badness* must have a particular explanatory direction for the structure of the solution given above to work, and this direction is not available to the conceptual competence theorist. It is hard to see how an *a priori* epistemology could do this, without endorsing a Gödelian intuitionism, according to which we are directly acquainted with abstracta.[49] I fully admit that such a view could meet the EC constraint—at least insofar as my MP-based proposal does—but I worry that such views have other problems.[50]

5. TAKING STOCK

I have focused on the two possible ways of understanding the epistemological condition on knowledge that nonnaturalists are thought to be unable to meet. I focused on these two because I think they are the strongest non-question-begging ways of understanding this influential objection to nonnaturalism. Of course, as always, nonnaturalists can (and have) argued directly against these epistemic constraints. On the other hand, insofar as these constraints have an intuitive pull, it would be nice to provide a nonnaturalist moral epistemology that can fulfill these conditions on knowledge as well.

MP, I have argued, is uniquely placed to do so. Perceptual experience can provide an epistemic connection if anything can; so as long as we can perceptually experience moral properties, this condition will be met. The challenge for the proponent of MP, then, is to show that perceptual experience of moral properties is possible. I have attempted to meet this challenge above. Finally, I have argued that MP is better placed to meet the fourth condition, EC, than traditional *a priori* theories. However, even though MP is better placed, it is not a trivial

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48 For the former view, see Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*; and Schroeter and Shroeter, "The Generalized Integration Challenge in Metaethics." For the latter, see Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, "The Moral Fixed Points."

49 See, for example, Gödel, "What Is Cantor's Continuum Problem?" For a recent defense of a similar sort of view, see Chudnoff, *Intuition*; and Bengson, "Grasping the Third Realm."

50 See Luzon and Werner, "Losing Grip on the Third Realm."

matter whether it can be met, even by a proponent of MP, because it depends on contentious issues about content fixing. Nonnaturalists, even nonnaturalist proponents of MP, are not wholly out of the woods. But important progress can be made on these entrenched epistemological objections to nonnaturalism, so long as we endorse a perceptualist model of moral knowledge.[51]

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