Book Section:
Lenman, J (2019) Ethics and perception : two kinds of quasi-realism. In: Cowie, C and Rowland, R, (eds.) Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics. Routledge (Taylor & Francis) . ISBN 9781138318335

https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429454677-11

Ethics and Perception: Two Kinds of Quasi-Realism[1]

道不遠人。人之為道而遠人, 不可以為道.[2]

Attributed to Confucius,中庸 Zhongyong 13

Abstract: Michael Huemer thinks the realist about ethical intuition is no worse off than the realist about sense perception when it comes to addressing the challenge of skepticism and so if we reject scepticism about the external, empirical world we should also reject scepticism about ethics. But we do not face in either domain a stark choice between realism and skepticism. There are intermediate options and these seem much more credible in the ethical case than the perceptual.

Michael Huemer's 2005 book *Ethical Intuitionism* is an admirably lucid and straightforward defence of intuitionistic moral realism According to Huemer, moral claims are claims about "a class of irreducible, objective properties, which cannot be known on the basis of observation."[3] So how are they known? They are known, he proposes, by intuition. Or at least the most fundamental ones are. We do not directly know by intuition, say, that the Iraq War was wrong if it was or that abortion is sometimes permissible if it is. But the most basic ethical truths can be known this way. Claims like:

> Enjoyment is better than suffering,
> If A is better than B and B is better than C then A is better than C.
> It is unjust to punish a person for a crime he did not commit.
> If a person has a right to do something, then no person has a right to forcibly prevent him from doing that thing.[4]

Intuitions are not the same as but are "distinct from and normally prior to" beliefs.[5] They are a species of seeming that can come apart from belief. So someone might have the standard set of apparently dissonant intuitions about the trolley problem: wrong to push fat man off bridge, OK to turn trolley – even though philosophical reflection has led them to conclude that one or other of them is false just as in the Mûller-Lyon Illusion the bottom line may still seem shorter even when we have come to know it is not.[6] Our warrant for the trust we accord our intuitions these may be explained, Huemer suggests, with reference to what he calls *the*

[1] I am grateful to Chris Cowie and Richard Rowland for inviting me to participate in the delightful and instructive conference at Rome from which this book arose; to my fellow participants there for their valuable input and to Philip Goff for his comments on an earlier draft.

[2] The Way is not far from human beings. When people follow a way that is far from human beings, it is not the Way.

[3] Huemer 2005, p 99. References are to this book unless stated otherwise.

[4] 102.

[5] 10.

[6] 100.

Principle of Phenomenal Conservativism according to which: "Other things being equal, it is reasonable to assume that things are the way they appear."[7]

It is not only ethical knowledge that is based on intuition in this way. It is, for example, only by intuition that I can know a priori that e.g. a thing cannot be both red all over and green all over or that simple, familiar logical forms are valid. Sense perception, memory and introspection of our own mental states are not, for Huemer, intuitions, but constitute seemings or appearances of a kind covered by the Principle of Phenomenal Conservativism. He appeals pervasively to analogies with these things, and to sense perception in particular.[8] Thus he illustrates the observation that intuitions are not infallible by means of a perceptual analogy:

> Suppose I seem to see a glass of water on the table. That is enough for me to justify believing there is a glass of water, in the absence of any countervailing evidence. However I may still hold this open to revision: if I reach for the 'glass' and find my hand passing through it, and if a dozen other people in the room say there is no glass there, I may decide there wasn't a glass there after all. As this example illustrates we normally take perceptual beliefs to be prima facie justified, just as the Principle of Phenomenal Conservation dictates. There is no obvious obstacle to holding intuitive beliefs to be justified similarly.[9]

Huemer, it is fair to say, likes the strategy J. L. Mackie dubbed argument from companions in guilt.[10] In chapter 5 of his book, on "Moral Knowledge", there is a version of it on almost every page. Thus he considers and responds to a variety of objections to his position of which the first demands some deeper rationale for supposing intuitions are reliable. Here he retorts:

> What happens if we apply the principle generally: We need positive reasons for trusting appearances? Then we need positive reasons for trusting sense perception, memory, introspection, even reason itself.[11]

> But I don't think proponents of this first objection intend to endorse either coherentism or skepticism in epistemology. Rather they believe intuition is somehow special, in a way that subjects it to a general demand for justifying grounds, a demand from which perception, memory, introspection and reasoning are exempt.[12]

The second objection he considers is that we can have no independent check on whether intuitions are correct. Here Huemer think the same worry, again generalizes dangerously to other cases like introspection, memory and induction. In the case of perception he offers a dilemma. If we are a bit strict on what we count as an independent check, sense perception is also in trouble for we have no way of checking our sensory perceptions without relying in some way on other sense perceptions. If we are more relaxed and allow that sense perception can be checked by seeing if the sense perceptions of others accord

---

[7] 99. Cf. 2001, 98-108.
[8] Another moral realist who appeals pervasively to an analogy with sense perception is Ralph Wedgwood in chapter 10 of his 2007. For critical discussion see my 2010, section 3.
[9] 107.
[10] Mackie 1977, p. 39.
[11] 107.
[12] 108.

with it or whether it coheres with my own other sense perceptions, well we can – and do - do this with intuition as well.[13]

We know the dialectic here. Of course someone might say, we have abundant reason to believe our sense perception is generally reliable. Common sense, heavily supplemented by our best science, has a rich and detailed, if in some ways still incomplete, story to tell about how all this works. We know about optics, acoustics, the anatomy and psychology of the human eye, ear and other sensory receptors. We know about the complex processes where the physical world impacts on us and puts us in sensory states that our brains engage with to obtain and process rich and generally accurate information about the world around us. We can add an evolutionary story that tell how this came about in ancestral pre- and proto-human populations because those members of it who were bad at this stuff had short lives and few if any offspring while those who were good at it became our ancestors. Lovely jubbly. But of course this whole story, the rich and detailed naturalistic story about sense perception we are in a position to tell ourselves only has the warrant we suppose it to have because of the rich and abundant empirical evidence we have for it and that evidence only gets to count as evidence because we assume we can trust our sensory perception. So if we don't beg the question in that way, Huemer has it, we get parity between the two cases.

Later in the chapter a further, but related objection is considered.[14] Take the pair of statements:

1. I have an intuition that p.
2. P.

1 is supposed to somehow justify accepting 2. But how? 2 certainly does not follow logically from 1. Perhaps we have inductive warrant to think ourselves justified in this because we have observed a correlation between intuitions abut ethical facts and ethical facts. But we cannot observe a correlation between intuitions and facts because we have no epistemic access to the facts except via intuition. Once again Huemer says taking this seriously puts us on a fast track to global skepticism. Here too he points out that we can use a precisely parallel argument to motivate scepticism about perception or memory. Thus, to take the former, our parallel statements could be:

3. I have a sensory experience of x.
4. x exists.

Again there is certainly no logical entailment. And there is no inductive warrant based on a correlation between our perceptual experience and the facts it discloses as we have no non-perceptual access to those facts, no access to the facts we know through perception that is itself independent of perception.

Of course, as Huemer acknowledges, this is hardly conclusive. Because the sceptical arguments look so similar it is likely they stand or fall together. But to conclude with any confidence that they do not stand fall we really need to say what the flaw is. Here Huemer appeals to the familiar ideal that in the case of perception we can somehow defuse the threat of skepticism by rejecting the veil of ideas picture offered by the indirect/representative realist in favour of a form of direct realism Sensations are not

[13] 108-9.
[14] 117ff.

"internal states that somehow represent real things". Rather they are "vehicles of the awareness of external things".[15] The "primary function of sensory experience is to a partly *constitute* our awareness of external things, rather than to be an intermediary *object* of awareness".[16] In parallel, Huemer argues,

> The intuitionist… should be a direct realist about ethics. He should not say that intuitions function as a kind of *evidence* from which we do or should infer moral conclusions, He should say that, for some moral truths, we need no evidence, since we are directly aware of them and that that awareness takes the form of intuitions; that is, intuitions just (partly) *constitute* our awareness of moral facts. Intuitions are not the objects of our awareness when we do moral philosophy. They are just the vehicles of our awareness, which we 'see through' to the moral reality.[17].

Here I confess myself unpersuaded. The idea, in the case of perception, that we can chase the threat of skepticism away by adopting direct realism, has always struck me as a terrific cheat. At best making this move would allow us to move the bump to another part of the carpet. To make an analogy with memory, we might insist it be built into our understanding of memory that memory is direct and veridical so there really can be no space for skepticism about whether any memories I might have furnish me with a true picture of the past. But as soon as we make that move we open up a very large and abundant space for skepticism about whether these states of mind I am experiencing are genuinely memories or merely quasi memories, apparent memories, of things that never happened or at least that never happened to me.[18] For the direct realist, analogously the skeptical problem simply resurfaces as that of sorting cases of perception from cases of apparent perception. Whatever we think "transparency" amounts to phenomenologically, there is really nothing to stop the more capable Cartesian demons from faking it very convincingly.[19]

In the case of ethical intuition it is still harder to make sense of what is being proposed. Here we might begin by noting how Huemer's endeavor, following George Bealer, to understand intuitions as a kind of intellectual seeming distinct from belief and

---

[15] 121,
[16] 121.
[17] 121-122. Cf. 2001, pp.81-85.
[18] Russell in an intriguing passage of his 1912 argues for a kind of direct realism about memory. "But for the fact of memory in this sense, we should not know tghat there was ever a past at all, nor should we be able to understand the word 'past, any more than a man birn blind can understand the word 'light'.(1912, 66)
[19] This seems particularly so for the version of direct realism defended by Huemer in his earlier 2001. Perceptual experiences, Huemer argues there, are 'purely internal' mental states by which he means that their existence does not logically imply the existence of any external object. A non-veridical perceptual experience could be exactly like a veridical one. That leaves the sceptic able to exploit the epistemic possibility that sensory experience is systematically non-veridical. Huemer seeks, in 2001 chapter 8, to deflect this kind of brain in a vat sceptic by insisting that we have abundant evidence for the existence of the external world in the form of the facts that are the contents of our perceptual beliefs which he has argued in chapter 5 are foundational. But the argument for that relied heavily on the Principle of Phenomenal Conservation and it seems to me that it is this and not the direct realism that is doing all the anti-sceptical heavy lifting here.

comparable to perceptual seemings is decidedly questionable. Here is Timothy Williamson:

> [I]ntellectual seemings typically lack the rich phenomenology of perceptual seemings. In its perceptually appearing that something is so, normally in the same event, much else perceptually appears too: that various things have various shapes and sizes, colors, sounds, tastes, textures, smells… By contrast, in the moment of its intellectually appearing that something is so, often nothing much else intellectually appears.[20]

Williamson here is generalizing about intuitions of diverse kinds, modal, logical, etc as well as moral. With moral intuitions there is sometimes a bit more going on for sure but (a) that bit more is plausibly most saliently emotional in character which doesn't much help given Huemer's robust cognitivism (b) even with moral intuitions the word *sometimes* bears emphasis. The point moves Williamson to favour a sparser conception of intuitions, in the spirit of David Lewis and Peter van Inwagen, as simply beliefs or judgements. But if we did that it would be very hard to see how we might then understand something analogous to direct realism for moral intuition.

There is a more central concern to be raised, it seems to me, about some of the things Huemer likes to say. Consider a passage I quoted earlier:

> What happens if we apply the principle generally. We need positive reasons for trusting appearances? Then we need positive reasons for trusting sense perception, memory, introspection, even reason itself.… But I don't think proponents of this first objection intend to endorse either coherentism or skepticism in epistemology."

The word "trusting" here is interesting. Very interesting. What am I doing when I "trust" an intuition or a perceptual judgement? I guess it is to take it as correctly representing (some direct realists might prefer a different word – "disclosing" perhaps) how things really are. Well, yes, but how much in the way of robust response-independence do we read into the word 'really'? We are not after all presented in epistemology with a stark choice between one the one hand, the most robust species of metaphysical realism and on the other a skepticism which stands ready to reject the whole empirical world as a tissue of delusion. There is a rich spectrum of intermediate positions that have from time to time been taken very seriously by our philosophical forebears. There is idealism for example, in its classical formulation by Berkeley, and a whole long history of folk, positivists, phenomenalists, radical empiricists who have run variations on Berkeley's project.

So is Berkeley in the business of withholding "trust" from sense perception? He would of course have strenuously denied that he was. He emphatically denies that he is defending any sort of scepticism or denying "the real existence of sensible things"[21]. As someone who takes himself to be a staunch defender of common sense he supposes he is doing no such thing. He doesn't deny that the tables and chairs and mountains and rivers exist. *Au contraire!* He simply denies that they are non-mental. The idealist takes these things to be perfectly real but simply made of ideas. Or, we might suppose, as a very

[20] Williamson 2008, 217.
[21] Berkeley 1713, 152.

similar thought was later elegantly put, that they are logical constructions out of sense data.[22]

> What must we think of houses, rivers, mountains, trees, stones; nay, even of our own bodies? Are all these but so many chimeras and illusions on the fancy? To all which, and whatever else of the same sort may be objected, I answer, that by the principles premised we are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or anywise conceive or understand remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a *rerum natura*, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force.[23]

The idealist can give you the mountains and the chairs. She can give you the whole world. In fact she can give you the whole of science. Whether we take it to be material or mental, the material world is an orderly place. It is full of patterns and uniformities. What we call science, on this view, is just a rigorous and painstaking description of these patterns and uniformities that doesn't presuppose realism about a mind-independent external world. Absent that supposition we still have a world and indeed it is still external. The table is ten meters away from my body. The sun is approximately 150 million Kilometers away from my body. These are facts about how things are arranged in space that have a clear operational meaning in an idealist take on reality and continue to be perfectly true.

> For example, the motion of the earth is now universally admitted by astronomers as a truth grounded on the clearest and most convincing reasons. But, on the foregoing principles, there can be no such thing. For, motion being only an idea, it follows that if it be not perceived it exists not; but the motion of the earth is not perceived by sense. I answer, that tenet, if rightly understood, will be found to agree with the principles we have premised; for, the question whether the earth moves or no amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit, whether we have reason to conclude, from what has been observed by astronomers, that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such or such a position and distance both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of the planets, and appearing in all respects like one of them; and this, by the established rules of nature which we have no reason to mistrust, is reasonably collected from the phenomena.
>
> We may, from the experience we have had of the train and succession of ideas in our minds, often make, I will not say uncertain conjectures, but sure and well-grounded predictions concerning the ideas we shall be affected with pursuant to a great train of actions, and be enabled to pass a right judgment of what would have appeared to us, in case we were placed in circumstances very different from those we are in at present. Herein consists the knowledge of nature, which may preserve its use and certainty very consistently with what hath been said. It will be easy to apply this to whatever objections of the like sort may be drawn from the magnitude of the stars, or any other discoveries in astronomy or nature.[24]

---

[22] Russell 1922, Lecture 2.
[23] Berkeley 1710, $34.
[24] Berkeley 1710, $58-59.

For the idealist there is still a perfectly clear sense to be given to the idea of trusting my sense perceptions. Here I am visually perceiving an apple. I trust my perception insofar as I believe that if reach out and grab it I will have tactile perceptions of the sort I have come to expect from an apple, that if I move it towards the place where I am – in various ways – sensible of the presence of my mouth, I can have gustatory perceptions of the kind I have come to expect from an apple, that if, in this way, I consume it and a sufficiency of other suitable edible things I am thereby more likely to experience the world in the way I associate with having a healthy, well nourished body. If such expectations as these all go disappointed, if, to echo Huemer, I reach for the 'apple' and find my hand passing through it, and if a dozen other people in the room say there is no apple there, that would be the sort of case I would describe as having an illusory sensory experience as of an apple, something I thereby quite readily distinguish from encountering a real one.

We might even regard this as a kind of, to coin a nice expression, *quasi-realism* about the external world.[25] We begin by seeming to deny it, insisting on the reality only of the, as we suppose them, inner world of ideas. We then rebuild it from those very ideas, rebutting, a la Berkeley the charge of scepticism, vindicating both science and common sense, earning the right to talk the way we always have. We get the natural world back. We get science back. Lovely jubbly.

But now look what we have gone and done. We got science back. We got the world back. But if we get these things back something comes back with it. What we get back with it is, among many other things, what I earlier *labelled the naturalistic story about sense perception*. We can explain and understand the phenomenon of sense perception in exactly the ways I sketched above. Sense perception is reliable in virtue of our having the bodily apparatus that we do which has evolved over countless generations of natural selection to be ever so good at this stuff. Just look at all the lovely empirical evidence we have for that now that we got science back.

And now what is striking about this picture is that it is really weird. I am almost tempted to say queer. We reconstruct the natural world from the raw material of our ideas only to find ourselves, and them, inside it. We started out with an idea of sense perception as the metaphysically fundamental thing from which we construct the whole universe. So we went and constructed it. And – crikey! - it was *ever so* big. Huge numbers of galaxies of stars, around one of which we find orbiting our own little world populated by us small mammalian organisms of whose cognitive rapport with their environment we have a rich naturalistic tale to tell. Sense-data, ideas, perceptual seemings, call them what you like, start out as the metaphysical building blocks of this vast universe only to end up getting situated within it as a tiny, extremely local, phenomenon in s small corner of it. We have a world that is metaphysically composed out of ideas and at the same time physically composed out of atoms with ideas, anything remotely mental, strikingly absent from almost all of it. Maybe physical and metaphysical composition can be wrenched apart in this way but the whole picture is surely looking strained.[26] Wouldn't it be more elegant,

---

[25] Cf. Pearce 2017b.

[26] We might try to eliminate the strain by going the whole Berkeley and putting a divine mind at the centre of this system. It would be weird if the whole universe were metaphysically dependent on the mentations of small and insignificant, extremely localised beasts like ourselves. But God is large and significant and omnipresent so adding him to the picture leads to a different story. I myself think theism is too philosophically

less extragavant, less strained in this weird way, to just jettison the metaphysical picture and simply embrace the natural one. The quasi-realist reconstruction of the sensory world promises to conserve the insights and understanding we owe to science, reconstructing from the data of experience the world that enterprise discloses. It is when we put ourselves into that world, as figures in a landscape not of our making, that the quasi-realist project looks liable to crash.

None other than Hylas comes very close to spotting the problem but is bamboozled – as always - by Philonous.

> Hyl: It is supposed the soul makes her residence in some part of the brain, from which the nerves take their rise, and are thence extended to all parts of the body; and that outward objects, by the different impressions they make on the organs of sense, communicate certain vibrations to the nerves; and these being filled with spirits, propagate them to the brain or seat of the soul, which according to the various impressions or traces thereby made in the brain, is variously affected with ideas.
> Phil: And call you this an explication of the manner whereby we are affected with ideas.
> Hyl: Why not, Philonous? Have you any thing to object against it?
> Phil: I would first know whether I rightly understand your hypothesis. You make certain traces in the brain to be the causes or occasions of our ideas. Pray, tell me, whether by *brain* you mean any sensible thing?
> Hyl: What else think you I could mean?
> Phil: Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and those things that are immediately perceivable, are ideas; and these exist only in the mind. This much you have, if I mistake not long since agreed to.
> Hyl: I do not deny it.
> Phil: The brain therefore you speak of, being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind. Now, I would fain know whether you think it reasonable to suppose that one idea or thing existing in the mind, occasions all other ideas. And if you think so, pray how do you account for the origin of that primary idea or brain itself?
> Hyl: I do not explain the origin of our ideas by the brain which is perceivable to sense, this being itself only a combination of sensible ideas, but by another which I imagine.
> Phil: But are not things imagined as truly in the mind as things perceived?
> Hyl: I must confess they are.[27]

---

costly an investment for theistic idealism to be credible. And perhaps theism would not help after all. Thus Kenneth Pearce: "As has long been recognized, the divine idea theory is a disaster for Berkeley because it is really a form of representative realism. On this view, the "archetype" in the divine mind is the real object, and my perception is veridical just in case it accurately copies that archetype. But then Berkeley falls victim to his own well-known criticism of representative realism. [at 1713, 238-9]" (2017a, 233-4) I don't know if pan-psychic variants such as Yetter-Chappell 2017 can hope to fix this problem. With Yetter-Chappell we are not talking about a copying relation but something much more intimate. "When I perceive the world around me, my mind overlaps with—and is partially constituted by—bits of the phenomenal tapestry that is reality." (71) The problem is that my sensory experience has a very different character to that of a Martian (as Yetter-Chappell herself recognizes - 78) or that of the brute animals that feed on filth and ordure (Berkeley 2013 161) or any of the countless other perceiving creatures that do or might exist. You're going to need *a lot* of reality if this is going to work.

[27] Berkeley 1713, 194.

> Phil: Not comes therefore to the same thing; and you have been all this while accounting for ideas by certain motions or impression in the brain, that is, by some alterations in an idea, whether sensible or imaginable, it matters not.
> Hyl:I begin to suspect my hypothesis.

Perhaps what Philonous says here is coherent but in rejecting an understanding of the mental as causally downstream of myriad physical processes and things he loses all his credibility as a champion of common sense. We can't sensibly think of the universe in all its hugeness and antiquity as somehow constructed out of things that feature in the mental lives of evolved bodily creatures built from protein that only showed up very late in its long history.

Huemer is surely correct that we cannot hope for an inductive warrant to suppose sense perception reliable based on a correlation between our perceptual experience and the facts its discloses as we have no non-perceptual access to those facts. We have no way to, as it were, look around or behind the perceptual appearances to check that the perceived objects are really there. That is indeed forlorn. But it looks much more promising to think the best warrant we have for such a supposition rather than being inductive would take, as Russell for example proposed, the form of an inference to best explanation.[28] Of course any warrant we thereby obtain is a defeasible one. It remains an epistemic possibility that I am demon deceived, a brain in a vat, the dupe of a computer simulation or whatever your favourite skeptical hypothesis says I am. But consistent with that possibility I can perhaps legitimately insist that the best explanation of why I seem to see a table is that (prescinding from a bit of detail) there is a table there, my eyes are in working order and the light is on. It is certainly an explanation lacking the significant infelicity just observed in the quasi-realist alternative.

Once we have the natural world epistemically in play we can tell this tale. We can rehearse the rich and detailed naturalistic story about sense perception. Sadly we cannot rehearse the rich and detailed naturalistic story about ethical intuition. Because there isn't one or at least not the sort of one the realist would need. Common sense supplemented by science has a rich and detailed, if of course incomplete, story to tell us about how the physical world impacts on our cognitive apparatus to produce perceptual sensations and perceptual beliefs. We haven't, by very stark contrast, the remotest conception how ethical intuition, understood in the realist spirit Huemer defends, is meant to work. We have these ethical seemings and we have them, it seems we are supposed to believe, because some kind of extra sensory process we know nothing about puts us somehow cognitively in touch with the supposed ethical facts. It is just this very significant disanalogy that is the basic thought behind the epistemic phase of Mackie's argument from queerness. We may perhaps supplement that thought by the sort of evolutionary considerations aired by Sharon Street[29]: isn't it striking how our core normative beliefs are exactly what we would might expect them to be if our coming by them had a naturalistic explanation where they are shaped by evolution in ways that need appeal only to their adaptive function and not to their accuracy?

I noted above that we are not after all presented in epistemology with a stark choice between, on the one hand, the most robust species of metaphysical realism and, on the other, a stark, despairing skepticism. Of course the same thing is true of ethics. You can be a robust realist like Huemer or Wedgwood or Enoch.[30] You can be a sceptic, like

---

[28] Russell 1912, chapter 2.
[29] Street 2006.
[30] Huemer 2005, Wedgwood 2011, Enoch 2011.

Mackie perhaps.[31] (Except as Blackburn points out, when Mackie says he is a sceptic he doesn't really mean it.[32] Maybe others do. I am never quite sure.) And there is a big range of intermediate positions, quasi-realists, constructivists and others who try to sail a safe philosophical passage between Scylla and Charybdis.[33] There are more things for

---

[31] Mackie 1977.

[32] Blackburn 1993

[33] It would be unfair in the case of Huemner to level a straight charge of false dichotomy as he gives considerable airtime to other possibilities. I have been discussing mostly chapter 5 of his book but chapters 2 to 4 are called, respectively "Non-cognitivism", "Subjectivism" and "Reductionism" and contain arguments against all those things so we may take it he supposes he has whittled the menu down appropriately. In no case I suspect is the whittling thorough enough to convince. I'll say a little only about chapter 2 as non-cognitivism is my favourite. More significantly it is the view that has been developed into quasi-realism by its leading contemporary exponents. - though in fact quasi-realists, just because they are quasi-realists, seldom use the term 'non-cognitivism' to describe themselves, though it is widely used of them by their detractors, including Huemer. Huemer's key dialectical move against 'non-cognitivism' then is to rehearse the familiar observation that the surface syntactical character and of moral language has a decidedly assertoric flavour. Of course that is hardly checkmate as the whole point of the quasi-realist programme has been precisely to recognise that fact and seek to explain it. Huemer is well aware of this but is unimpressed with the efforts of quasi-realist philosophers to bring the thing off, wanting no truck with their "meta-linguistic trickery", whose effort to "embrace common sense in words but reject it in substance" he compares explicitly to Berkeley's (he thinks unconvincing) protestations that he was not a sceptic.(44) Humer considers Gibbard's (1990) proposal to capture the logical behaviour of normative language by means of a system of factual-normative worlds. Meaning, for Goibbard , "lies in what is ruled out."(1990, 99); we are to understand the state of mind expressed by a normative statement by reference to its "ruling out various combinations of normative systems with factual possibilities."(1990, 99) As Huemer explains, "Gibbard wants to explain the meaning of the conditional 'If it was wrong to steal the candy, then God will punish you', by reference to the set of factual-normative worlds that the speaker's state of mind rules out." (33) Indeed. So the sentence in question rules out all factual-normative world where the normative impermissibility of the candy stealing is combined with the factual condition of you going unpunished by God. But now he complains that if we take the atomic states of believing God will punish you, not so believing, being agnostic about this, approving candy stealing, disapproving and not caring, we cannot combine these in a way that rules out just what we need to rule out. Indeed we cannot. What puzzles me is why Huemer thinks it is a problem Conditionals are not conjunctions What is expressed by a conditional cannot be expressed as a conjunction constructed out of the antecedent, the consequent and their respective negations, though of course if it is a material conditional it can be expressed as the negation of one. So Gibbard's inability to express the state of mind in question as a combination of these elements should neither surprise nor trouble us. Huemer now turns to Blackburn's proposal (1998, 71) that we understand conditionals as expressing dispositional states. If I accept 'If p then q' then I express a disposition to accept q should I come to accept p. But not quite of course. I might come to accept p and not come to accept q because when I come to accept p I change my mind about the conditional. Huemer think is this is fatal for Blackburn because it "empties his analysis of content" (36) Compare the disposition expressed by a disjunction: to accept 'R or S' to be disposed to come to accept R if I should come to reject S and vice versa. This too is hypothetical. I might just reject the original disjunction. (Sometimes I am *certain* to as with Huemer's example of his acceptance

"trusting" my intuitions to be than what the robust realist supposes. The key difference between the ethical and the perceptual case concerns the credibility of our making sense of our experience somewhere in this middle ground. In the ethical case, it seems to me, we are on much stronger ground here.

Here we are with our intuitions trying to figure out what is right. We do so by seeking to impose coherence upon them both intrapersonally in deliberation and interpersonally in codeliberation. What our earth is afoot? Here Rawls in *Political Liberalism* famously contrasts two contrasting understandings of the sort of enterprise in which he is engaged, that of the rational intuitionist and that of the political constructivist. Both views rely on the idea of reflective equilibrium but the constructivist understands this not as a theoretical procedure tracking some independent truth but as at the service of a practical political project where terms of social cooperation are to be established not by appeal to an outside authority or to an independent order of moral values but by "an undertaking among those persons themselves in view of what they regard as their reciprocal advantage." "The bases of this view lie in fundamental ideas of the public political culture as well as in citizens' shared principles and conceptions of practical reason."[34]

We can understand these positions by contrasting they way they understand intuitions, the inputs, as it were, to the process of reflective equilibrium. For rational intuitionism these are to be conceived of as a form of perceptual or quasi perceptual epistemic accessing of the order of independent moral facts intuitionists take to be the subject matter of ethics. Not so for the constructivist. For him, the inputs are rather expressions of, as Rawls has it, the public political culture of western democratic societies, of us, of our own moral sensibilities as we find them in the historical and cultural place where we are. When we conceive of the project of moral inquiry as concerned with the distinctively practical project of a group of people trying to arrive at an agreement about what moral understandings they might all be prepared to accept and to share and regulate their lives together by, intuitions are not best understood as representations of a realm of normative reality constituted prior to and independent of our ethical experience but as expressions of who we are and what we care about. And from this philosophical perceptive the important thing about intuitions is, as Bernard Williams put it, not that they "should be in some ultimate sense correct, but that they should be ours."[35]

That distinctively practical project, according to me, is what ethics is. I take it to be an enterprise driven ultimately by the passions in the souls as we seek to arrive at shared

---

of "Either there are unicorns living on the planet Jupiter, or cows have four stomachs." – v-introduction is cheap!) But of course the complex dispositional state expressed by a conditional is *different* to the complex dispositional state expressed by a disjunction. And dispositions that are *vacuous* can hardly be *distinct*. Huemer insists that "claims about one's dispositions must entail determinate predictions regarding actions apart from the 'actions' of acquiring and losing the dispositions." (36) But I'm not sure when this got to be a rule. To be angry with someone, someone might suggest, is to have a disposition to punch them – unless of course in the meantime one has ceased to be angry. To be enamoured of someone, the same theorist goes on to suggest, is to have a disposition to give them a cuddle – unless of course in the meantime one ceases to be enamoured. This little dispositional theory of the emotions is a little simple-minded for sure but it is hardly vacuous. Both the angry disposition and the enamoured disposition are hypothetical just like Blackburn's inferential dispositions. But this is complexity, not vacuity, which is how the two dispositions manage to be so clearly distinct.

[34] Rawls 1993, 97.

[35] 1985, p. 102.

moral understandings we can agree to endorse and have regulate our lives together in moral community.[36] All kinds of emotional[37] and semantic ascent is possible here that may earn us the right to speak of truth, objectivity, facts, realities, and so on. The deflationary, quasi-realist project is familiar to us all.[38] It is a picture of ethics as something we want and need to help us meet our various human desires, aspirations and ideals and that is ultimately woven from the fabric of those things without reference to some external, independent order of value, something that seems to me quite redundant in understanding or motivating what we are about.

Like our sensory experiences, these desires, aspirations and ideals are, on a cosmic scale, very small, localized, human things but they serve a very small localized, human purpose. They have no lofty ambitions. So the ethical quasi-realist whatever their other claims is not threatened by the kind of weirdness – queerness even – I diagnosed for their counterpart in the case of sense perception. While we cannot credibly construct the natural world out of bits of our mental experience, we can credibly construct the ethical world from the passions in our soul. The idealist's quasi-realist project with the empirical world ended up looking decidedly queer. In ethics, by contrast, we quasi-realists are not the queer ones. The idea that the empirical world is somehow "just us" would be a kind of anthropocentric madness. But it is hard to see how ethics could be anything other than a human thing serving human ends. Here anthropocentrism makes abundant sense. The Way is not distant.

References

George Berkeley: *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) reprinted in *The Principles of Human Knowledge and Other Writings* (ed. Warnock) (London: Fontana/Collins, 1962). Pages references to latter.
Blackburn, Simon:, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value" in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 149-165.
Simon Blackburn: *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
David Enoch: *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2011)
Allan Gibbard: *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgement* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 1990).
Michael Huemer: *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield ,2001)
Michael Huemer: *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.)
James Lenman: "Uggles and Muggles: Wedgwood on Normative Thought and Justification" in *Philosophical Studies* 151, 2010, 469-477.
James Lenman: "The Primacy of the Passions" in Anna Bergqvist and Robert Cowan :(erds)*Evaluative Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 282-294.
J. L. Mackie: *Ethics: Inventing Rights and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[36] See e.g. Lenman 2018.
[37] Cf. Blackburn 1998, chapter 1.
[38] Anyone not familiar with it might start with the writings cited here by Blackburn.

Kenneth L. Pearce: “Berkeley on Unperceived Objects and the Publicity of Language” in History of Philosophy Quarterly 34, 2017, 231-250.(2017a)
Kenneth L. Pearce: Language and the Structure of Berkeley’s World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).(2017b)
John Rawls Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)
Bertrand Russell: The Problems of Philosophy (Oxford: OUP, 1967 (first published 1912)).
Bertrand Russell: Our Knowledge of the External World (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922)(first published 1914).
Sharon Street: “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value” in Philosophical Studies 127, 2006, 109-166.
Ralph Wedgwood: *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
Bernard Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins: 1985)
Timothy Williamson: *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).
Helen Yetter-Chappell: “Idealism Without God” in Tyron Goldschmidt & Kenny Pearce (eds.), *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 66-81.

中庸 Zhongyong (https://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong)