

## *Reidian Moral Perception*

TERENCE CUNEO  
Calvin College  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546  
USA

It is a common antirealist strategy to reject realism about some domain of entities for broadly epistemological reasons. When this strategy is applied to realism about moral facts, it takes something like the following form:

The moral realist believes that there are full-blooded, irreducible moral facts. But if there are moral facts of this sort, then we shall have no plausible story to tell about how we have epistemic access to them. After all, how can facts about what *ought* to be the case impinge upon our cognitive faculties so as to produce the corresponding states of knowledge? Indeed, rather than give us any plausible story about how we have epistemic access to moral facts, the realist posits a moral faculty by which we are supposed to 'intuit' or 'see' moral facts. But in doing so, the realist offers us an overly mysterious epistemology in addition to an already mysterious ontology. But any good theory ought not to multiply mysteries. So, all other things being equal, we ought to reject moral realism.

I suspect that something like this objection lies at the source of the deep uneasiness that some philosophers have with moral realist views.<sup>1</sup> My

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1 My formulation of the argument owes something to Colin McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), ch. 6. For variants of this objection, see J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin 1977); Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, 'Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory,' in *Moral Knowledge?* W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996); and Stephen Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview 1998) — although none of Darwall, Sayre-McCord, or McGinn endorses the argument.

fundamental aim in this essay is to draw upon the thought of Thomas Reid to answer this objection. That is, I wish to offer a sketch of a positive moral epistemology that borrows heavily from Reid's thought in order to show how, on a realist view, we have epistemic access to moral features of certain kinds. Accordingly, I shall set myself two tasks in the following discussion. The first task consists in offering an interpretation of what Reid says about moral perception. Since Reid's views are in places underdeveloped, it shall also consist in sympathetically extending his views, and correcting them when necessary. The second task consists in showing explicitly how the resultant Reidian view can help the realist to answer the objection stated above.

To this let me add a word about the manner in which I shall approach Reid's own views. It is, I believe, easy to overlook the force and subtlety of Reid's views on moral perception. In comparison to his elaborate treatment of our perceptual knowledge of the external world, Reid's account of moral perception in essay III of the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* can seem compressed, selective, and, in places, thin. Part of my argument shall be that when we combine Reid's discussion of moral perception in the *Active Powers* with what he says elsewhere about aesthetic perception and our knowledge of natural signs, we get a much more interesting, rich and provocative account of how we might perceive moral features of certain kinds.

## I Assumptions

I assume that there are many ways by which we acquire moral beliefs. We acquire them on the basis of testimony, advice, imagination, imitation, *a priori* reflection, reasoning, and reading literature, to name a few. In this essay, I shall concern myself with only one way by which we acquire moral beliefs — that way which consists in 'perceiving' moral properties of concrete particulars at a time.

I call this manner of acquiring moral beliefs 'particularist moral perception.' It is 'particularist' because it concerns the manner in which we perceive particular moral qualities (e.g., *Sam's compassion* or *that this action is wrong*), and not general moral rules or norms.<sup>2</sup> Together with

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2 Throughout this discussion, I use the term 'moral quality' in the semi-technical sense to pick out instances of moral properties at the actual world. I shall understand instances of moral properties to be either moral facts (e.g., *that Sam is compassionate*) or 'abstract particulars' (e.g., *this person's wickedness*). That Reid himself operated with the notion of an abstract particular is evident (see EIP V.iii: 367).

Reid, I assume that particular moral qualities are (or are constituted by) higher-order features of persons and mental entities such as intentions, beliefs and desires — what Reid calls ‘things in the mind.’<sup>3</sup> Thus, I assume that moral properties are features of actions only insofar as these properties are determined by intentions, beliefs, desires, etc., of certain kinds.<sup>4</sup> To this I should add that, on this occasion, I shall be concerned with the manner in which a person perceives moral properties of other persons and their intentions, beliefs, desires, etc., and not the ways in which she apprehends moral properties of herself or her own intentions, beliefs, desires, etc., via introspection.

I call the present manner of acquiring moral beliefs a mode of perception because it qualifies as such (at least in an extended sense) according to Reid’s view.<sup>5</sup> I realize that the term ‘perception’ is something of a term of art in philosophical discourse that admits of more or less analogical extensions. I also realize that Reid’s views on perception are hardly common currency in contemporary discussions of moral perception. So,

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All references to *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (EIP) and *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (IHM) are to the critical editions edited by Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1997 & 2002, respectively). References to *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (EAP) are to the version edited by Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1969). References follow an essay, chapter, page number format. (The exception to this is references to EAP essay III, which follow an essay, chapter, section and page number format.) Quotations from Reid in the text are followed by references in the text to the relevant passage from Reid’s work.

- 3 ‘Every thing is said to be in the mind, of which the mind is the *subject*.’ However, we are to remember that ‘this distinction between things in the mind, and things external, is not meant to signify the place of the things we speak of, but their *subject*’ (EIP I.i: 21-2).
- 4 ‘Some figures of speech are so natural and so common in all languages, that we are led to think them literal and proper expressions. Thus an action is called brave, virtuous, generous; but it is evident, that valour, virtue, generosity, are the attributes of persons only, and not of actions. In the action considered abstractly, there is neither valour, nor virtue, nor generosity. The same action done from a different motive may deserve none of these epithets. The change in this case is not in the action, but in the agent; yet, in all languages, generosity and other moral qualities are ascribed to actions. By a figure, we assign to the effect a quality which is inherent only in the cause’ (EIP VIII.iii: 587). See also EAP V.iv: 395 and V.vi: 448.
- 5 Reid himself distinguishes between perception ‘most properly applied’ and analogical extensions of the term (EIP I.i: 23). It may be that, according to his own criteria, Reid’s frequent talk of moral perception is best interpreted as an analogical extension of the term because the objects of perception are things in the mind. See EIP I.i: 22.

my first task is to sketch Reid's general view of perception and to show that moral perception is a mode of perception according to Reid. Along the way, I shall highlight some of the more attractive features of Reid's view.

## II Reid on Perception

Perhaps the best inroad to Reid's views on perception is to distinguish between two models or 'schemas' of perception that Reid himself employs.<sup>6</sup> What I will call the 'standard schema' is the most conspicuous in Reid's thought. In rough outline, it has the following three-part structure. Suppose we let 'O' pick out some quality of an object — say, an object's hardness or its smoothness. According to the standard schema, when a person S perceives O, O affects S's sensory organs in certain ways. These impressions on S's sensory organs occasion sensations of certain kinds in S — sensations of pressure, tingling, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> Finally, these sensations function as a *sign* or an indicator of O, and, when all goes well, by a 'law of our constitution,' they immediately occasion S's apprehending O and believing about O, that O exists (or believing something that entails this). So, to employ Reid's favorite example: A person's perceiving the hardness of an object consists in that object's hardness affecting S's sensory organs in such a way as to occasion a sensation of pressure, and this sensation immediately evokes or (to use Reid's term) 'suggests' the apprehension (or 'conception') of that hardness, and the belief about it, that it exists as part of S's environment (or a belief that entails this).<sup>8</sup>

In a moment, I will highlight several salient features of Reid's standard schema. For now, let me turn to what I call Reid's 'non-standard schema' of perception, which shares a similar tri-partite structure with the standard schema. In the first place, according to the non-standard schema, when a person S perceives O, there is some sign that stands in some type of dependence relation to O and indicates or signifies O. Second, this sign

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6 I borrow the terminology from Nicholas Wolterstorff's recent treatment of Reid in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), chs. 5 and 6.

7 In ordinary cases of perception, what Reid calls 'impressions' on our sensory organs are not noticed by the perceiver, but occur 'behind the scenes' (IHM VI.xxi: 176-7).

8 When pictured, the standard schema looks like this: O (e.g., an object's hardness) → impression (physical stimulus) → sign (e.g., pressure sensation) → apprehension/belief. With the exception of the first instance, '→' stands for the relation that Reid calls 'suggestion.'

occasions an impression that suggests to S that O exists as part of S's environment. And, finally, when all goes well, this impression evokes in S the apprehension of O and immediate belief about O that it exists (or some belief that entails this). Reid says that cases of visual perception satisfy the non-standard schema. For example, suppose we let 'O' stand for the shape of an object such as an object's roundness (what Reid calls an object's 'real figure'). According to Reid, an object's roundness will generate a two-dimensional elliptical appearance when placed obliquely to the eye. This elliptical appearance (what Reid calls an object's 'apparent figure') functions as a sign of that object's roundness. When all goes well, this appearance will, in turn, occasion an impression of a sort on our sensory apparatus that evokes the apprehension of that object's roundness and the belief about it that it exists (or some belief that entails this).<sup>9</sup> The non-standard schema is certainly less conspicuous in Reid's thought than the standard one; indeed, given Reid's heavy emphasis on the standard schema, it is easy to overlook altogether. But it is present nevertheless. As I have indicated, it is the schema that Reid employs when analyzing visual perception. It is also the schema that Reid uses when discussing our perception of other minds, and some cases of what he terms 'acquired perception.'<sup>10</sup> Two differences between it and the standard schema are especially important for our purposes.

In the first place, the non-standard schema tells us that it is signs of various kinds that play the role of evoking apprehension and belief, but it does not stipulate that these signs are mere sensations. Indeed, in numerous places, Reid makes it clear that the signs that occasion conception and belief on the non-standard schema are not mere sensations. In the case of visual perception, for instance, the signs are visual *appearances* of various sorts such as an object's appearing elliptical.<sup>11</sup> Second, the non-standard schema does not stipulate that S's perceiving O consists in O's having made certain impressions upon S's sensory organs. It may be that, on the non-standard schema, S perceives O because some other entity that stands in a suitable relation to O affects S's sensory organs.

These, then, are the broad outlines of Reid's account of perception. My claim shall be that Reid thinks of moral perception as satisfying what

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9 Diagrammed, the non-standard schema goes as such: O (e.g., an object's roundness) → sign (e.g., an object's elliptical appearance) → impression (physical stimulus) → apprehension/belief.

10 See IHM VI and EIP II.xxi: 237.

11 See IHM VI.v: 86, VI.xxii: 186, VI.xxiii: 191.

I've called the 'non-standard schema.'<sup>12</sup> But before we turn our attention to this matter, let me fill in some of the details of Reid's account.

At the heart of Reid's view is the thesis that perception is *interpretation*; it's hermeneutics of a special kind. In particular, Reid tells us that perception is a matter of interpreting signs of various kinds; signs are *indicators* of objects and 'encode' (not Reid's term) information about them. One of Reid's signal contributions in his polemic against the mental representationalist views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume is that, in cases of perception, signs very often do not imaginatively resemble what they signify. In cases of tactile perception, for instance, pressure sensations of various sorts are signs of an object's hardness, but there's no resemblance between pressure sensations and an object's hardness. Moreover, in the vast majority of cases, says Reid, when we perceive an object, we do not attend to the signs that indicate it, but pass them over without notice. Indeed, in the ordinary case, it takes an extraordinary amount of effort to unravel conceptually a sign from what it signifies. When we perceive a table's hardness, for instance, we typically pay no attention to the pressure sensation occasioned by it and that indicates its existence. Only when we begin to press very hard against the table do we notice the distinction between the sign (the pressure sensation) and what it signifies (the object's hardness).<sup>13</sup>

Signs, then, typically play their role without, so to speak, drawing attention to themselves. What we should add to this is that they do their job with remarkable economy. In cases of perception, signs *immediately* evoke an apprehension of a quality, and a belief of that quality, that it exists; there's no inference that brings us from sign to signified.<sup>14</sup> That

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12 In another essay, 'Signs of Value: Reid on the Evidential Role of Feelings in Moral Judgment' (unpublished), I argue that there is a way by which we can extend what I've called the 'standard schema' to account for different sorts of cases of moral perception. In such cases, feelings of certain kinds act as signs for moral qualities.

13 'What hath imposed upon philosophers in this matter, is, that the feelings of touch, which suggest primary qualities, have no names, nor are they ever reflected upon. They pass through the mind instantaneously, and serve only to introduce the notion and belief of external things, which by our constitution are connected with them. They are natural signs, and the mind immediately passes to the thing signified, without making the least reflection upon the sign, or observing that there was any such thing' (IHM V.v: 63; also see EIP II.xvi: 195ff). For similar comments about visual perception, see IHM VI.ii: 81.

14 Reid claims that there 'is no reasoning in perception, as hath been observed' (IHM VI.xx: 172). See, also, EIP II.v: 96. In one place, Reid likens the interpretative element in perception to the way in which we immediately see that a group of letters has a certain meaning. See IHM V.ii: 57.

signs of various sorts immediately and ineluctably occasion apprehension and belief in perception is a function of our native constitution, or hardwiring.<sup>15</sup>

I've claimed that, according to Reid's view, the function of signs of certain kinds is (in part) to occasion an apprehension of — a *mental grip on* — an entity, where apprehension is a mental act distinct from belief. In claiming this, I've followed Nicholas Wolterstorff's recent interpretation of Reid in which Reid's use of the term 'conception' functions as a synonym for 'apprehension'.<sup>16</sup> What I should like to do is to borrow a further insight from Wolterstorff, who points out that apprehension comes in a variety of species. Most important for our purposes is the distinction between what Wolterstorff calls 'conceptual apprehension' and 'presentational apprehension.' Conceptual apprehension is (roughly) a matter of getting an entity in mind by way of the apprehensive use of some definite description or singular concept. I can, for instance, get the property of goodness in mind by way of the description *the property that Moore compared to yellow*. Presentational apprehension, by contrast, is not a matter of getting a mental grip on an entity by way of some definite description or singular concept. Rather, it's a matter of getting a mental grip on an entity by virtue of that entity's being *present* to one's understanding. So, for example, though I can get the property of goodness in mind by the aforementioned description, my apprehending that description itself is (in the ordinary case) not a matter of grasping it by some further description. Rather, I am acquainted with it; it is present to my understanding.<sup>17</sup>

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15 However, to claim that signs of certain kinds immediately evoke or 'suggest' apprehension and belief is not, in Reid's view, to offer an explanation of what occurs in perception. See IHM V.viii: 74 and VI.xii: 121.

16 Wolterstorff, ch. 1. Also see William Alston, 'Reid on Perception and Conception,' in *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, M. Dalgarno and E. Mathews, eds. (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1986), which offers a similar interpretation of Reid's thought. Here is what Reid says: 'Conceiving, imagining, apprehending, understanding, having a notion of a thing, are common words, used to express that operation of the understanding, which the Logicians call *simple apprehension*. Logicians define simple apprehension to be the bare conception of a thing, without any judgment or belief about it' (EIP IV.i: 295). Also see EIP I.i: 24 and EIP.vii: 65.

17 Reid himself appears to operate with a similar distinction. Some instances of what Reid calls having a 'relative' conception of a thing overlap with what Wolterstorff calls 'conceptual apprehension'; and some instances of what Reid calls having a 'direct' conception of a thing overlap with what Wolterstorff calls 'acquaintance.' See EAP I.i: 5-10. Also, see EIP IV.i: 395.

### III Reid's View Initially Stated

Earlier I suggested that a helpful way to approach Reid's moral epistemology is to consider what he says about our perception of aesthetic qualities. Let me begin, then, by quoting a passage from Reid's chapter entitled 'Of Taste' from the *Intellectual Powers*.

But neither mind, nor any of its qualities or powers, is an immediate object of perception to man. We are, indeed, immediately conscious of the operations of our own mind. Other minds we perceive only through the medium of material objects, on which their signatures are impressed. It is through this medium that we perceive life, activity, wisdom, and every moral and intellectual quality in other beings. The signs of those qualities are immediately perceived by the senses; by them the qualities themselves are reflected to our understanding; and we are very apt to attribute to the sign, the beauty or the grandeur, which is properly and originally in the things signified. (EIP VIII.iv: 602-3)

A similar line of thought is expressed in Reid's treatment of natural language in the earlier *Inquiry*:

A man in company, without doing good or evil, without uttering an articulate sound, may behave himself gracefully, civilly, politely; or, on the contrary, meanly, rudely, and impertinently. We see the dispositions of his mind, by their natural signs in his countenance and behavior, in the same manner as we perceive the figure and other qualities of bodies by the sensations which nature hath connected with them. (IHM VI.xxiv: 191)

What we find here, I suggest, is Reid consciously applying what I've called the 'non-standard schema' of perception in order to explain how we might perceive aesthetic and moral qualities, and other properties of persons and their minds.<sup>18</sup> In a moment, we will have to refine and

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18 Here is another passage in which Reid explicitly brings out the connection:

'Nature seems to have given to men a faculty or sense, by which this connection [between sign and signified] is perceived. And the operation of this sense is very analogous to that of the external senses.

'When I grasp an ivory ball in my hand, I feel a certain sensation of touch. In the sensation, there is nothing external, nothing corporeal. The sensation is neither round nor hard; it is an act of feeling of the mind, from which I cannot, by reasoning, infer the existence of any body. But, by the constitution of my nature, the sensation carries along with it the conception and belief of a round hard body really existing in my hand.

'In like manner, when I see the features of an expressive face, I see only figure and colour variously modified. But, by the constitution of my nature, the visible object brings along with it the conception and belief of a certain passion or sentiment in the mind of the person.

In the former case, a sensation of touch is the sign, and the hardness and

elaborate upon what Reid says. But here is how his account runs in its most basic form.

Moral qualities (as well as aesthetic qualities) are most fundamentally features of persons and their intentions, beliefs, desires, and so forth. These qualities are manifested in various ways in the countenance and behavior of the persons who instantiate them. As such, says Reid, the countenance and behavior of persons function as signs — signs of qualities to which they stand in the relation of signifying. Central to Reid's view is the conviction that these signs come in at least three varieties. In the first place, there are 'natural' signs that comprise what Reid calls 'natural language.'

The signs in natural language are features of the face, gestures of the body, and modulations of the voice; the variety of which is suited to the variety of the things signified by them. Nature hath established a real connection between these signs, and the thoughts and dispositions of the mind which are signified by them; and nature hath taught us the interpretation of these signs; so that, previous to experience, the sign suggests the thing signified, and creates the belief of it. (IHM VI.xxiv: 190)<sup>19</sup>

So, for example, Reid suggests that certain tones of voice and a 'menacing posture' are natural signs of anger, which even young children recognize as such prior to being taught this (EIP VI.vi: 485).<sup>20</sup> Thus understood, Reid tells us that there is a close analogy between what he calls 'original perception' and perception that involves the apprehension of those signs that comprise natural language.<sup>21</sup> In cases of original perception, if a person with the requisite maturity has sensations of certain kinds, then by an 'original principle of our constitution' these sensations immediately yield apprehension and belief of the appropriate sort. For example, if a person of the requisite maturity has a certain pressure sensation upon touching, say, a table, that sensation will, by a law of our constitution, immediately evoke an apprehension and belief of that entity, that it is hard. Similarly, if a person of the requisite maturity apprehends the

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roundness of the body I grasp, is signified by that sensation. In the latter case, the features of the person is the sign, and the passion or sentiment is signified by it' (EIP VI.v: 486).

19 Throughout his discussion, Reid has his eye on persons of the requisite maturity whose cognitive faculties are working well in an appropriate environment. I will assume likewise in the subsequent discussion.

20 The natural signs that comprise 'natural language,' then, are the second type of natural sign that Reid identifies in IHM VI.iii: 59-60. See also IHM VI.xxiv: 191.

21 See IHM VI.xxiv: 191-3.

natural signs that comprise natural language as they are manifested in a person's behavior, then by an original principle of our constitution, the apprehension of these signs will immediately evoke the apprehension and belief of that person that she is angry, despondent, jubilant or the like.<sup>22</sup>

Second, there are those natural signs that are such that their 'connection with the thing signified is established by nature, but discovered only by experience' (IHM V.iii: 59).<sup>23</sup> For example, though it is established by nature that a particular type of taste sensation is associated with apples and not pears, it is only through repeated experience that a person learns that that taste sensation is the taste of apples and not pears (IHM VI.xx: 171). Similarly, while behavior of certain types is a natural sign of compassion (e.g., embracing) the correlation between these signs and compassion is often only discovered with the proper experience.

Third, Reid claims that there are 'artificial signs' — signs that are the product of 'compact and agreement' (IHM IV.ii: 51). Although Reid himself never speaks of the ways in which a person's countenance and behavior can be artificial signs of properties of persons and things in the mind, it's not difficult to see how the claim would go. By convention, behavior of certain types (e.g., saluting another) signifies properties of persons and things in the mind (e.g., an intention to show respect for another). We learn by experience and induction into social practices of certain types that behavior of that sort signifies qualities of those kinds.

What I should like to stress is that, in Reid's view, perception that involves the apprehension of natural signs of this second type and artificial signs is also non-inferential in character. Here is what Reid says: 'when we have found two things to have been constantly conjoined in the course of nature and in human expression, the appearance of one of them is immediately followed by the conception and belief of the other' (IHM VI.xxiv: 195-6). So, in persons with sufficient maturation, proper experience and habits, apprehension of these latter types of sign immediately evokes apprehension and belief of those things that they signify; there's no inference in the picture.<sup>24</sup> Perception of this sort, says Reid,

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22 Although I shall not develop the point, it is interesting that Reid's views on natural language enjoy a significant amount of empirical support from work done by contemporary developmental psychologists. See Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kohl, *The Scientist in the Crib* (New York: Morrow 1999).

23 Natural signs that belong to this type are the first sort of natural sign that Reid identifies in IHM V.iii: 59.

24 See IHM VI.xxiv: 190.

bears a close resemblance to ‘acquired perception’ — perception that is the upshot of learning processes in which we discover correlations between signs and what is signified.<sup>25</sup> Of special interest to our project here is that Reid sees no conflict between a given case of perception’s being ‘theoretically loaded’ — insofar as it presupposes that a person has extensive background beliefs, assumptions, and conceptual expertise — and its being non-inferential. Part of nature’s gift to us is the ability to move immediately from sign to signified in cases of acquired perception and its near relatives.

### 1. *The argument initially stated*

I can now state in its initial form the argument I wish to develop.<sup>26</sup> In Reid’s view, we can perceive that persons and their mental states have

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25 Reid explains acquired perception thus: ‘In acquired perception, the signs are either sensations, or things which we perceive by means of sensations. The connection between the sign, and the thing signified, is established by nature: and we discover this connection by experience; but not without the aid of our original perceptions, or of those we have already acquired. After this connection is discovered, the sign, in like manner as in original perception, always suggests the thing signified, and creates the belief of it’ (IHM VI.xxiv: 191).

26 It will be noticed that Reid himself frequently employs this style of argument (see EIP VI.iv: 463). It bears a resemblance to an argument that Reid offers for the reliability of moral judgment in EAP III.iii.vi: 237.

Incidentally, those familiar with Keith Lehrer’s treatment of Reid’s account of moral perception (see Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* [New York: Routledge 1989], ch. 12) will note that the Reidian view with which I am concerned in this essay is both more broad and more narrow than the one that Lehrer attributes to Reid. According to Lehrer’s interpretation of Reid, in cases of moral perception, the ‘input is the conception of an action, and the output is a moral judgment’ (ibid., 24). My view is broader than this insofar as I claim that, in Reid’s view, there are (i) multiple types of input that occasion moral apprehension and judgment, including awareness of the countenance and behavior of other persons — where awareness is a mental act not identical with conception; and (ii) multiple objects of moral perception, including character traits and intentions. Given that Reid himself repeatedly talks of perceiving character traits upon being aware of the countenance and behavior of persons, I see no reason to attribute to Reid the position that, in every case of moral perception, the input is a conception of an action. Lehrer also suggests that among the actions conceived are possible actions, and not simply actual ones (see ibid. p. 224). When Reid writes ‘our first moral conceptions are probably got by attending coolly to the conduct of others and observing what moves our approbation and what our indignation’ (EAP V.ii: 372), I agree that he is plausibly read as having his eye (at least in part) on possible actions. However, for the sake of manageability, in this paper I am concerned only with how we perceive moral qualities — where moral qualities are features of entities at the actual world and not possible actions, character traits, etc.

various higher-order properties. For example, we can perceive that persons are intelligent, frightened, stingy, cheeky, finicky, forthright, determined, and so on. We can also perceive that their intentions, beliefs and desires are imprudent, rash, insensitive to evidence, out of character, and so forth. In particular, we are capable of perceiving these higher-order properties as they are instantiated in others by virtue of being acquainted with various natural and artificial signs — tones of voice, bodily expressions, uses of language, and so forth. Indeed, if Reid is right, we are so constituted that, when all goes well, we interpret these signs as indicative of the presence of one or another higher-order quality. A significant class of moral qualities, however, are higher-order features of persons and their mental states (e.g., *x's being kind*, *x's being such that it merits approbation*, etc.). Reid suggests, plausibly enough, that just as we are constituted to perceive various higher-order non-moral features of persons and their mental states upon having the appropriate experience and being acquainted with signs of various sorts, so also are we constituted to perceive certain *moral* features of persons and their mental states upon having the appropriate experience and being acquainted with signs of various types. But, if this is correct, then there is no special problem of how we can perceive moral qualities as opposed to other higher-order features of persons and mental states. Moral perception of this kind is simply a special case of perceiving features of persons and things in the mind: We are acquainted with various signs as experiential inputs, and this gives rise, when all goes well, by a law of our constitution, to apprehension and belief of the appropriate sort.

This is the broad form of the argument I wish to develop. But there are refinements and qualifications that need to be made.

#### IV Refining the View

We've seen that moral qualities, in Reid's view, are most fundamentally properties of persons and 'things in the mind.' In cases of moral perception, our access to these qualities is mediated through signs of various kinds. I want now to suggest that a more nearly adequate account of moral perception requires us to explore two issues about which Reid says relatively little. The first issue concerns the nature of moral qualities, and the second concerns the nature of concepts. Let me consider briefly each issue in turn.

## 1. Moral qualities

Reid is an unabashed realist concerning the moral domain: moral qualities exist and are neither constituted by our subjective responses to non-moral features of the world nor are they the product of some contractual agreement.<sup>27</sup> Although Reid himself says little about the nature of moral qualities, he clearly believes that there's an intimate connection between what *aesthetic* qualities are and how we perceive them. Here is what he says in his 'Essay on Taste':

Beauty or deformity in an object, results from its nature or structure. To perceive the beauty therefore, we must perceive the nature or structure from which it results. (EIP VIII.i: 578)<sup>28</sup>

If we take Reid's views about aesthetic qualities to be indicative of his views concerning moral ones — as I think we should — then we can see Reid making two claims.<sup>29</sup> In the first place, Reid's view is that moral qualities are resultant or supervenient qualities of a sort. They are qualities that are determined by other non-moral qualities. In this sense at least, Reid's view concerning the nature of moral qualities prefigures the dominant trend among contemporary moral realist views. The second claim that Reid makes is that to perceive a moral quality requires perceiving certain relevant qualities from which it results. My own view is that Reid is right to claim that moral qualities are resultant, and that what we say about the ontology of moral qualities has ramifications for our account of moral perception. But I think he's wrong about what those ramifications are: To perceive a given moral quality, we needn't perceive the qualities from which it results. So, part of my aim in this section shall be to improve upon what Reid says here by drawing upon what he says elsewhere.

Central to the modified Reidian account I shall offer is the assumption that moral properties fall into two species: 'evaluative' moral properties

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27 Speaking of aesthetic excellence, Reid says, 'it depends no doubt upon our constitution, whether we do, or do not perceive excellence where it really is: but the object has its excellence from its own constitution, and not from ours' (EIP VIII.iii: 584). For a more extensive argument against positions that claim that moral qualities are akin to secondary ones, see EIP VI.vi: 494-5 and EAP V.vii: 480. Reid's objections to contractarianism can be found in IHM II.ii: 51 and EAP V and VI.

28 See, also, EIP VIII.iv: 598.

29 I won't try to defend this claim here. I simply note that in the 'Essay on Taste' Reid comes close to identifying aesthetic and moral qualities of certain sorts with each other.

and 'deontic' moral properties respectively. As I shall think of them, evaluative moral properties are properties such as *being compassionate*, *being kind*, *being honest*, *being wicked*, and the like. They are properties the instantiation of which merit responses of appropriate sorts from properly situated agents, but don't themselves direct these agents to respond in any fashion. By contrast, deontic properties are ones such as *having a (moral) obligation to x*, *being such that one (morally) ought to x*, and *having a (moral) reason to x*. They are properties the instantiation of which directs properly situated agents to behave in certain ways.

Later, I will have something more to say about the ontology of moral qualities. For present purposes, it will be sufficient to make two assumptions. First, I shall assume that, if a given cluster of non-moral qualities determines that a thing has a given moral property, then this determination relation holds by conceptual necessity (rather than, say, nomic/causal necessity).<sup>30</sup> Second, I shall assume that there's a conceptual connection between evaluative qualities and deontic qualities of certain kinds. That is, I assume that if a particular entity has the property of, say, being wicked, then it has by conceptual necessity the property of being such as to merit disapprobation.<sup>31</sup> Some philosophers, such as Jonathan Dancy, appear to claim that the so-called 'thick' evaluative properties of a particular entity and its 'thin' deontic qualities are identical.<sup>32</sup> While I grant that in a wide range of cases a particular thing's having some evaluative property (say, wickedness) and its being such as to merit an appropriate response on our part are necessarily co-extensive, I doubt that they are the same quality. An intention's wickedness, for example, does not direct us how to respond to it, but its being such that it merits disapprobation does. Moreover, an intention's wickedness is plausibly viewed as being expressed in a wicked action insofar as that action *manifests* or flows from that wickedness. But that intention's being such that it merits disapprobation isn't expressed by that action, and isn't manifested in the same fashion as its wickedness. If this is right, it's plausible to believe that a thing's deontic and evaluative qualities are indeed distinct. To perceive a thing's wickedness and to perceive that it merits disapprobation is to perceive two different qualities.

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30 See Robert Audi, 'Ethical Naturalism and the Explanatory Power of Moral Concepts,' in his *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 120-2.

31 See EAP III.iii.vi: 236.

32 Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), 115

## 2. Concepts

I turn now to the nature of concepts.<sup>33</sup> Following Reid's lead, I shall assume that for a person to *possess* a concept *f* is for that person to possess a certain range of abilities. Central among those abilities is the capacity of that person to think of anything at all, that it is *f*. I shall also assume that we can be aware of things *under concepts*. And let's say that for a person to *be aware of something under the concept of f* is for that person to take that thing *to be f* or *as being f*. Perception, as I shall think of it, always involves awareness under concepts. Accordingly, perception always has 'representational' content. That is, a person's perceiving something always involves *how* that thing is represented to that person in his perception. About this notion of representational content, let me say two things.

First, the phenomenon of how a thing is represented in awareness is not something that Reid himself stresses in his own account of perception. But neither is it incompatible with what Reid says.<sup>34</sup> What the Reidian can say is that, while perception involves apprehension and belief of something that it exists as part of one's environment, it also involves being aware of what's perceived *as being* a certain way. Indeed, according to a Reidian view, one might claim that a person's being aware of a thing as being a certain way in a given case of perception is typically included in the doxastic ingredient of that perception. So, for example, a Reidian analysis will maintain that the doxastic component of my perception of the carpet's being green is the *de re* belief of the carpet, that it is green. The predicative component of that belief ('that it is green') incorporates my awareness of the carpet *as being* green.

Second, it's important to distinguish the representational content of a given perception from the manner in which we apprehend what's perceived. Upon being aware of Melissa's behavior, I might perceive Melissa as being angry. That's the representational content of my experience — the way in which my environment is represented to me in experience. But this is a different phenomenon from what accounts for how I get her anger in mind in perception — for the manner in which 'mental reference' to her anger is secured. According to a Reidian view, I apprehend Melissa's anger by way of being acquainted with behavioral

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33 My understanding of concepts is indebted to Wolterstorff, ch. 1, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *From Presence to Practice* (The Gifford Lectures for 1994-95, unpublished).

34 *Pace* what Christopher Peacocke suggests in *Sense and Content* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), 6.

signs of various kinds. Accordingly, it's plausible to believe that the manner in which I apprehend Melissa's anger in perception is a species of what I called earlier 'conceptual apprehension.' It is a matter of getting her anger in mind by way of the singular concept *that anger of which this behavior is an expression*. If this is right, the representational content of a perception of some thing shouldn't be identified with the mode of apprehension of that thing. The former is the manner in which a thing appears in experience; the latter is not.

Finally, I shall assume that a person can more or less *master* a concept. A person has *mastery* of a concept *f* if that person has a broad range of skills that include being appropriately sensitive to signs or cues that something is *f*, being able to discriminate properly that something is *f* and another thing is not *f*, being able to apprehend correctly that something is *f* in disparate and new cases, being able to perceive that something is *f* with a suitably high degree of resolution, and so forth. Apprehending something under the concept of which a person has mastery is, then, typically the manifestation of intellectual skills or virtues that are themselves the upshot of experience, learning, and habit.<sup>35</sup>

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35 There's a wonderful passage in which Reid emphasizes the fact that acquiring the requisite mastery of moral concepts is a blend of our innate hardwiring, training, and habit:

'We must not therefore think, because man has the natural power of discerning what is right, and what is wrong, that he has no need of instruction; that this power has no need of cultivation and improvement; that he may safely rely upon the suggestions of his mind, or upon opinions he has got, he knows not how.

'What should we think of a man, who, because he has by nature the power of moving all his limbs, should, therefore conclude that he needs not be taught to dance, or to fence, to ride, or to swim? All these exercises are performed by that power of moving our limbs, which we have by nature; but they will be performed very awkwardly and imperfectly by those who have not been trained to them, and practised in them.

'What should we think of the man who, because he has the power by nature of distinguishing what is true from what is false, should conclude that he has no need to be taught mathematics, or natural philosophy, or other sciences? It is by the natural power of human understanding that every thing in those sciences has been discovered, and the truths they contain are discerned. But the understanding left to itself, without the aid of instruction, training, habit, and exercise would make very small progress, as every one sees, in persons uninstructed in those matters.

'Our natural power of discerning between right and wrong, needs the aid of instruction, education, exercise, and habit, as well as our other natural powers' (EAP III.iii.viii: 249).

What Reid says here goes some distance toward explaining moral disagreement of certain kinds. Some moral disagreement is the result of different persons having been trained in different ways, having acquired and exercised different habits, being

With these distinctions in hand, we can divide cases of perception into at least two broad kinds. First, there are cases in which an agent perceives that  $x$  is  $f$  at  $t$ , but in which she did not possess the concept of  $f$  prior to perceiving  $t$ , and her perceiving that  $x$  is  $f$  at  $t$  *evokes* the concept of  $f$ . Second, there are those cases in which a person perceives that  $x$  is  $f$  at  $t$  because she already possesses the concept of being  $f$  and has the requisite mastery of it. My focus shall be on cases of the latter kind. In particular, I shall focus on those cases of the second kind in which the person in question has the requisite mastery of moral concepts.

## V The View Refined

When we consider what Reid himself says about particularist moral perception, it's clear that in most cases he has got his eye on the way in which we perceive particular evaluative qualities of persons and things in the mind. So, let me start there.

Begin with those cases in which we perceive evaluative moral qualities of persons — in particular, those cases in which we perceive character traits of persons. Reid has little hesitation in affirming that we do perceive such things. It is worth quoting Reid at length on this point.

Intelligence, design, and skill, are not objects of the external senses, nor can we be conscious of them in any person but ourselves. Even in ourselves, we cannot, with propriety, be said to be conscious of the natural or acquired talents we possess. We are conscious only of the operations of mind in which they are exerted. Indeed, a man comes to know his own mental abilities, just as he knows another man's, by the effects they produce, when there is occasion to put them to exercise.

A man's wisdom is known to us only by the signs of it in his conduct; his eloquence by the signs of it in his speech. In the same manner we judge of his virtue, of his fortitude, and of all his talents and virtues.

Yet it is to be observed, that we judge of mens talents with as little doubt or hesitation as we judge of the immediate objects of sense.

One person, we are sure, is a perfect idiot; another, who feigns idiocy to screen himself from punishment, is found upon trial to have the understanding of a man, and to be accountable for his conduct. We perceive one man to be open, another cunning; one to be ignorant, another very knowing; one to be slow of understanding, another quick. Every man forms such judgments of those he converses with; and the common affairs of life depend upon such judgments. We can as little avoid them as we can avoid seeing what is before our eyes.

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more or less expert in the application of a concept, and so forth. So, according to Reid's view, it is possible for two persons to receive the same experiential input, but to apprehend what is indicated by that input under different concepts (say, because of being trained in different ways), and, thus, to form different moral judgments.

From this it appears, that it is no less part of the human constitution, to judge of mens characters, and of their intellectual powers, from the signs of them in their actions and discourse, than to judge of corporeal objects by our senses. (EIP VI.vi: 503-4)

In this passage, we find Reid once again explicitly applying what I've called the 'non-standard perceptual schema' to our perception of character traits. Upon being aware of signs of certain kinds, we find ourselves immediately apprehending and believing of a person that she is wise, benevolent, or wicked as the case may be (or believing something that entails this). Presumably, perception of this sort can take different forms. In some cases in which we perceive moral traits, we're quite aware of the signs that evoke apprehension and belief. For instance, a person might be explicitly aware of Sam's having sharply rebuked Melissa in public for what appears to be a matter of little importance. In this case, we might say that this person is aware of Sam as being morally insensitive by virtue of being aware of his behavior toward Melissa. In other cases, however, the signs that occasion apprehension and belief are not explicitly noticed. Upon interacting with Sam, a person might find herself apprehending and believing of Sam that he is insensitive; he 'strikes' her in this way, and she finds herself aware of him under the concept of being morally insensitive.<sup>36</sup> In this case, Sam's striking this person in this way may be the upshot of a variety of extraordinarily subtle signs — the way he looks her over, his tone of voice, his inattention to their conversation, an off-hand remark of his — that she does not explicitly notice. So, while this person may be aware of these signs, it is not a case of *noticed* awareness. Moreover, it may be that, upon reflection, this person is unable to identify with any degree of precision the signs that occasioned this apprehension and belief. It is cases such as these that mirror most closely what Reid believes to happen in most instances of our perception of external objects. In most cases of perception of external objects, we typically take no notice of the signs that suggest apprehension and belief; indeed, Reid says that we don't have names for most of the signs that occasion these mental acts.

One of the more interesting features of the passage from which I've quoted is that Reid insists that we don't have acquaintance with a person's character traits; the traits themselves are not present to us in perception. And this is true even with respect to a person's own character traits; a person only apprehends that she has certain traits by virtue of

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36 Here I've been helped by John Greco, *Putting Skeptics in Their Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), ch. 9.

being aware of their manifestations. What this strongly suggests is that Reid thinks of our apprehension of a person's character traits as being a species of what I called earlier 'conceptual apprehension' — apprehension by way of the apprehensive use of some definite description or singular concept. To be sure, in cases in which we perceive a person to have one or another virtue or vice, we ordinarily are aware of that person (or her behavior) under some moral concept; we see that person (or her behavior) as insensitive, benevolent, or wicked. That is the representational content of our perception. But our grasp of, our apprehending, that person's trait itself is a function of what we might call an 'expressive particular concept.' We apprehend Sam's insensitivity by virtue of being aware of the behavior that expresses this trait. We grasp it by way of the apprehensive use of the singular concept of *that insensitivity of which this behavior is an expression*.

This is, so far forth, to sketch a Reidian account of our perception of moral virtues and vices. But not all evaluative moral properties are traits of persons; intentions, desires, beliefs, emotions and actions can also exemplify evaluative properties. Reid himself says considerably less concerning our perception of the evaluative properties of things in the mind than he does concerning our perception of traits.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it's clear that his account of our perception of these qualities mirrors the account we have just considered concerning our perception of traits. It is by virtue of being aware of signs in the form of the countenance and behavior of persons that we perceive that one or another intention, belief, emotion, action-plan, etc., has a moral property of a certain kind. Sometimes the signs are explicitly noticed; other times they are not. Moreover, if what I've said is correct, the representational content of these perceptions includes being aware of an intention, belief or desire as being wicked, kind, benevolent, and so on. But, in a wide range of cases, the apprehensive ingredient in the perception of these qualities is, I submit, also a species of conceptual apprehension. In cases of moral perception in which we apprehend, say, the moral wickedness of an intention, we often do so by way of the expressive particular concept *the wickedness of the intention of which this behavior is an expression*.

Reid's account of our apprehension of deontic moral qualities exhibits something of a departure from his treatment of our perception of evaluative moral qualities. Reid clearly holds that when we apprehend deontic qualities, we often do so immediately; we don't, for instance, typically

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37 He isn't silent on the matter, however. See EIP VI.v: 486, VI.vi: 508 and IHM VI.xxiv: 191.

reason from general moral norms to particular moral obligations.<sup>38</sup> However, what is absent from Reid's account of our apprehension of deontic qualities is an emphasis on signs as being those entities that signify deontic features of things. Why Reid downplays the role of signs in such cases, I am not sure. But it seems to me that Reid's views about the role of signs in our perception of evaluative moral qualities can be comfortably extended to cases of perceiving deontic qualities.

Return, for example, to the case in which Sam sharply rebukes Melissa in public. I have suggested that Sam's behavior can function as a sign of Sam's moral insensitivity, and that a person can perceive Sam under the concept of being morally insensitive. But it also seems plausible to claim that, by virtue of being aware of Sam's behavior, a person might perceive Sam or his behavior under any number of deontic concepts. Upon witnessing Sam's behavior, a person might perceive Sam as being worthy of rebuke. Or, somewhat differently, she might apprehend his behavior as being such as to merit disapprobation. Likewise, upon discerning that Melissa is humiliated because of Sam's behavior, a person might perceive that she ought to comfort her. In cases such as these, we are explicitly aware of the signs that indicate that Sam is worthy of rebuke or that Melissa ought to be comforted. But, as with cases of our perception of evaluative qualities, not all cases of perception of deontic qualities involve being explicitly aware of signs that indicate their presence. While arguing with my wife about an issue that I believe is important, I might, in response to certain cues, ascertain that I ought to discontinue the argument altogether. The signs that occasion this conviction may be extraordinarily subtle, and I might not take explicit notice of them. (Although, on reflection, I may see that, if I were to continue the argument, I would be in danger of damaging our relationship in a certain way.) If this is right, explicit awareness of signs is no more necessary in cases of perception that involve awareness under deontic concepts than it is in cases of perception that involve awareness under evaluative ones.

Having noted the similarities between perception of evaluative and deontic qualities, now let me highlight a difference. I've claimed that it is plausible to attribute to Reid the position that we apprehend evaluative moral qualities by way of the use of what I've called 'expressive

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38 'I apprehend, that in every kind of duty we owe to God or man, the case is similar: that is, that the obligation of the most general rules of duty is self-evident; that the application of those rules to particular actions is often no less evident; and that, when it is not evident, but requires reasoning, that reasoning can very rarely be demonstrative' (EIP VII.ii: 553). Here (as elsewhere) Reid appears to use the term 'self-evident' to pick out what we call 'immediate' or 'basic' beliefs.

particular concepts.' Not so with deontic qualities. Deontic qualities, as I've already indicated, are not expressed in behavior in the same fashion that evaluative qualities are. Evaluative qualities are manifested in behavior; Sam's behavior *flows from* his being morally insensitive. Deontic qualities aren't manifested in behavior in this fashion. The property of *being such as to merit disapproval* isn't expressed by Sam's intentions; it is a *consequence* of them — a *conceptual* consequence of them. Of course it doesn't straightaway follow from this that our apprehension of deontic qualities in cases of moral perception is something other than conceptual apprehension. Nevertheless, I am inclined to believe that it sometimes is. Some cases of our perception of deontic moral qualities are cases in which we are acquainted with moral qualities.

Consider, once again, the scenario in which Sam sharply criticizes Melissa in public. Suppose, having witnessed the scene, I thereupon perceive Sam as having behaved himself in a morally insensitive manner and being worthy of rebuke. That's the representational content of my perception — the way in which Sam and his behavior are represented in my perception. The Reidian view is that it is my awareness of signs of various kinds that immediately occasions this apprehension with its representational content and the corresponding belief of Sam that he has behaved himself inappropriately and is thus worthy of rebuke. What I wish to suggest is that my perception of these moral qualities incorporates a blend of at least two modes of apprehension.

If the account I have offered to this point is correct, my apprehension of Sam's having behaved himself in a morally inappropriate manner is a species of conceptual apprehension. I apprehend the insensitivity of Sam's behavior by way of the singular concept *that insensitivity of which this behavior is an expression*. But my apprehension that Sam ought to be rebuked on account of his behavior is a matter of discerning a conceptual connection between the inappropriateness of his behavior and the responses that are appropriate to him. It is a matter of discerning that Sam's behaving himself in a morally insensitive fashion *determines* that Sam ought to be rebuked. It seems to me that, in the typical case, our mode of apprehension of conceptual relations is a species of acquaintance; we don't ordinarily grasp conceptual relations by, say, proper names or definite descriptions. If that's right, then we can say that in perceiving that Sam is worthy of being rebuked I am acquainted with that fact. It is also worth noting that this account of our perception of deontic qualities echoes what Reid says elsewhere about our awareness of particular relations and their relata:

Another way in which we get the notion of relations (which seems not to have occurred to Mr. LOCKE) is, when, by attention to one of the related objects, we perceive, or judge, that it must, from its nature, have a certain relation to something

else, which before perhaps we never thought of; and thus our attention to one of the related objects produces the notion of a correlate, and of a certain relation between them. (EIP VI.i: 422)<sup>39</sup>

The present account, however, seems not to fit every case in which we perceive deontic qualities. While arguing with my wife, I'm aware of certain signs that signify that I ought to discontinue the argument altogether. I've claimed that, in such a case, the signs that I ought not to persist in arguing might be extremely subtle and that my awareness of them is not noticed awareness. In such a case, it's not very plausible to claim that, by virtue of being aware of certain signs, I perceive a particular evaluative quality and the relation it bears to a particular deontic quality. As I have described the case, I don't perceive any evaluative moral quality at all. Nor is it very plausible to claim that, by virtue of being aware of certain signs, I grasp some non-moral quality, and the fact that this non-moral quality determines that I ought to discontinue the argument. Once again, in such a case, I don't have any conscious awareness of the signs, let alone the non-moral facts that determine that I ought not to persist in the argument. The representational content of my perception simply includes my being aware of this situation as being one in which I ought not to continue the argument. I have what Reid calls a 'relative conception' of my duty in this case. Accordingly, my apprehension of the obligation in question is plausibly viewed as a species of conceptual apprehension; I grasp the obligation by way of the singular concept of *that obligation that directs me to discontinue the argument*.

The manners in which the present Reidian account of perception both diverges from and corresponds with what Reid says about aesthetic perception should now be clear enough. Recall that in his account of our perception of aesthetic qualities, Reid says that we perceive a given aesthetic quality by way of perceiving the non-aesthetic qualities that determine it. I've suggested, by contrast, that our perception of a given evaluative quality does not have as its ingredients a double-perception: it does not involve being aware that a sign signifies a given non-moral determining quality, perceiving that non-moral quality, and thereupon perceiving some determined moral quality. Rather, in the case of our perception of moral virtues and vices, we are aware of signs, and this awareness immediately occasions the apprehension and belief of a given person that she has one or another virtue or vice. We often don't have any awareness of the qualities on which that person's virtue or vice supervenes — though, of course, we have awareness of the *signs* that

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39 See, also, EAP III.iii.viii: 258.

indicate that virtue or vice. A more apt way of describing the case would be to say that, insofar as that person has mastery of the appropriate moral concepts, *she takes it for granted* that signs of this sort indicate the moral trait in question. That's part of what it means for this person to master the relevant moral concepts. Indeed, if we characterize moral perception of this sort as a species of (or at least closely analogous to) acquired perception, then this is exactly what we should expect. In cases of acquired perception, we pass immediately from sign to signified by 'custom and habit'; we take it for granted that signs of this sort indicate qualities of that kind.

That said, the account I've offered of the manner in which we perceive deontic qualities bears a closer resemblance to what Reid says about our perception of aesthetic qualities. In some cases of our perception of deontic qualities, I've suggested that we apprehend a conceptual connection that obtains between a given evaluative moral quality (or particular non-moral qualities) and a particular deontic quality and thereby perceive the deontic quality itself. So, in cases such as these, it is plausible to believe that perception does go from perceptual awareness of determining qualities to determined.

## VI The Argument Re-stated

Let me now return to the main argument. It was objected to the moral realist that, if we grant that there are irreducible moral facts, then the realist can offer us no plausible account of how we have epistemic access to them. The Reidian response is to employ a 'companions in guilt' strategy. We start out by noting that it is plausible to hold that we can have epistemic access to non-moral features of persons and their minds by perceiving them. We perceive these non-moral features by way of being aware of signs of various sorts that indicate them. Perception of this type is sometimes akin to what Reid calls 'original perception'; but in most cases, our perception of these non-moral features is the upshot of experience, training, and habit, and thus is most akin to what Reid terms 'acquired perception.' We then note that one way by which we have epistemic access to moral qualities is identical with the way in which we have epistemic access to non-moral features of persons and things in the mind. We perceive them by way of being aware of signs of various kinds. In the case of evaluative moral qualities, we perceive these qualities by way of being aware of the countenance and behavior of persons that express them. In this sense at least, our perception of a person's moral insensitivity is no different in kind from our perception of a person's intelligence or fickleness; it also requires experience, training, and habit. In contrast, we sometimes grasp deontic qualities by being

aware of the conceptual connections they bear to evaluative moral qualities or non-moral qualities of certain types. Lest it be thought that there's something particularly mysterious at work here, it's worth noting that we also grasp other sorts of non-moral deontic features of persons and things in the mind by way of being aware of the conceptual relations that they bear to non-deontic features. Upon becoming aware that Sam has behaved himself rudely, Melissa might apprehend that he deserves disapprobation of a certain kind. Or, upon Sam's failing to use the appropriate means to satisfy his desires, Melissa might judge that he has behaved irrationally and that he ought to have behaved himself differently. All this is involved in having mastery of the relevant concepts. (Perhaps, it's worth emphasizing that the moral realist appears to have no more of a problem accounting for how we perceive moral qualities than a moral conventionalist does. Even if the conventionalist offers a different account of the ontology of moral qualities, her account of moral perception appears to be structurally identical with the realist's.) So, the conclusion we reach is this: our perception of moral qualities appears not to be significantly different from our perception of non-moral qualities of certain kinds. It follows that, if we hold that we can perceive non-moral qualities of these kinds, but not moral qualities, then our position is infected by arbitrariness. It also follows that, if we agree that our perception of non-moral qualities and moral qualities is on par, but claim that we can't perceive either sort of quality, we're saddled with skepticism of a particularly radical sort. To which I might add that robust skepticism about other minds is not (to my knowledge) a view that our more prominent contemporary moral antirealists are eager to defend.

## VII Two Objections

Let me close by considering a pair of objections that are likely to be raised against the Reidian account of moral perception.

Fundamental to the Reidian view you've defended is the thesis that an agent's perceiving moral qualities of persons and things in the mind is, in all relevant respects, identical with an agent's perceiving non-moral qualities of persons and things in the mind. But surely there is this relevant difference: moral apprehension and judgment bear some sort of intimate relation with motivational states that many non-moral judgments do not. Upon apprehending and judging that an agent deserves approbation, we are normally motivated to act in an appropriate fashion. Nothing similar is true, however, of cases in which we apprehend and judge that, say, someone else is intelligent, finicky, or forthright. But unless the Reidian view can

accommodate this difference, it is far inferior to broadly sentimental positions that can explain the motivational efficacy of moral perception by claiming that moral evaluation is somehow grounded in moral sentiments or feelings.<sup>40</sup>

My own conviction is that there is a multitude of plausible ways to respond to this objection.<sup>41</sup> Among these plausible responses is Reid's own, and so I shall sketch it.

To have the heart of Reid's reply before us, we need to take note of a further nuance of his view. Reid was of the conviction that in cases of moral perception when all goes well, an agent's apprehension of a moral quality is accompanied not only by a moral judgment, but also by 'affection' and 'feeling.' Reid calls the complex mental state comprised of moral apprehension, moral judgment, affection, and feeling 'moral approbation.' Says Reid, moral approbation includes 'not only a moral judgment of ... [an] action, but some affection, favourable ... toward the agent, and some feeling in ourselves' (EAP III.iii.vii: 238).<sup>42</sup> The idea is that, for a person S to morally approve of an act-token A is (i) for S to judge that A has one or another positive moral feature and (ii) to have some affection toward the agent who does A, or toward his A-ing, which is itself accompanied by a positive feeling tone of some sort.

According to Reid, then, the full-blown mental state that is the upshot of moral perception is moral approbation. Insofar as this is a unified state of belief and affection, Reid anticipates the broadly internalist views defended by philosophers such as David McNaughton.<sup>43</sup> But why, in

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40 This objection was raised by both Peter Kivy and an anonymous referee.

41 I myself defend a more nearly Humean view in Terence Cuneo, 'Reconciling Realism with Humeanism,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002) 465-86.

42 Reid is explicit that the agent in question may be oneself (see EAP III.iii.vii: 239). On a different note, at EAP III.ii.i: 121, Reid claims that feelings are an ingredient in any affection. So, in the passage I've quoted, why does Reid distinguish between the affection toward someone and the feeling had by the agent? My guess is that Reid adopts this style of description merely to emphasize that feelings are constituent in affection. I should also note that, in some places, Reid says that affections 'accompany' judgment and approbation and are not constituents thereof. See EAP III.iii.vii: 241-2.

43 See David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell 1988), chs. 3 and 7. One apparent difference between Reid's view and McNaughton's is that the latter appears to claim that there is a necessary conceptual connection between moral belief and motivation. Reid's considered view, however, seems to be that the connection is one effected by the proper functioning of our constitution. If this is right, Reid's view is only weakly internalist (or weakly externalist, depending on

Reid's view, are moral apprehension and judgment accompanied by motivational states of affection and feeling? Reid's answer is multi-pronged. In opposition to the sentimentalist views of Adam Smith, Reid claims that these motivational states are the immediate upshot of our constitution and not the product of a process of imaginatively identifying with others or anticipating the verdict of an impartial spectator.<sup>44</sup> We are so constituted that, when all goes well, a person's judging that she ought to *x* is accompanied by the appropriate motivational state.<sup>45</sup> That moral apprehension and judgment should (when all goes well) give rise to motivational states of the appropriate sort, suggests Reid, is no more astonishing than the fact that sensations of various sorts give rise to conception and belief.

But Reid is also sensitive to the charge that merely appealing to our constitution to account for moral motivation does not fully explain the central role and significance and, thus, motivational power that moral judgments have in the life of a morally good person. Accordingly, Reid stresses that, in the morally good person at least, immoral conduct puts that person 'at variance with himself' by inducing a sense of 'dread' and 'worthlessness' (EAP III.iii.vi: 244 and 245) and ruptures the bonds of affection that 'next to a good conscience ... make the capital part of human happiness' (EAP III.ii.iii: 142). Moral motivation is thus, in Reid's view, frequently overdetermined by different principles: 'conscience, as an active principle, sometimes concurs with other active principles, sometimes opposes them, and sometimes is the sole principle of action' (EAP III.iii.viii: 255). And this is just as well, for '[s]ympathy with the distressed may bring them a charitable relief, when a calm sense of duty would be too weak to produce the effect' (EAP III.ii.vi: 183).

A second objection to the Reidian view runs thus:

You've claimed that, according Reid's view, we can 'perceive' moral qualities. But it's very plausible to believe that it's a neces-

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the typology used). For a defense of this interpretation of Reid, see Terence Cuneo, 'Reid's Moral Philosophy,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Reid*, T. Cuneo and R. van Woudenberg, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004).

44 See EAP III.ii.iii: 158ff. If we understand 'sentimentalism' as the claim that 'moral evaluation, is somehow grounded in human sentiment' (Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, 'Sentiment and Value,' *Ethics* 110 [2000] 722-48, at 722), there is a sense in which Reid is a sentimentalist. Reid claims that our first moral conceptions are formed by attending to the moral qualities of others and feeling the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation. See EAP V.1: 369 and 372.

45 See EAP III.iii.vii: 242ff.

sary condition of a person's perceiving an object that her perceptual experience is itself causally dependent on that object. One reason for believing that the 'causal requirement' is true is this: the representational content of a given perceptual experience doesn't uniquely pick out the object of that experience. (The representational content of two perceptual experiences could be phenomenologically identical and yet refer to different objects.) So, it's plausible to think that, in order to secure singular mental reference to an object, there has to be an appropriate causal connection between a person's perceptual experience and the object perceived. But your account of moral perception has remained entirely silent on the 'causal requirement.' And since there are powerful independent reasons for thinking that moral facts are causally inefficacious, there seems to be no sense in which we can 'perceive' moral qualities.<sup>46</sup>

Suppose we agree that, in order for a person to perceive a given entity, then she must apprehend that entity. And suppose we also agree that the apprehensive ingredient in perception must bear some appropriate causal relation to the entity apprehended. If we grant these assumptions, then it would appear that it's incumbent on the Reidian to establish that moral qualities are causally efficacious.

Now I don't intend to attempt to settle the difficult question of whether moral qualities are causally efficacious here, but I think there's a manner in which we can make some headway on the question.<sup>47</sup>

Return for a moment to our earlier discussion of the ontology of moral qualities. I claimed earlier that it's Reid's view that moral qualities are resultant qualities that ontologically depend on other, non-moral qualities. One plausible way to think of the type of dependence relation in question is as follows. Suppose we assume that there are general moral norms — norms that tell us that tokens of intentions, action-plans, beliefs, etc., of such-and-such sort have moral properties of such-and-

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46 This objection owes its inspiration to Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997). However, McGinn doesn't develop it as an objection to moral perception in particular.

47 According to Reid, moral qualities couldn't be causes strictly speaking. Reid is of the view that causes in the strict and proper sense are always *agents*. But I see no reason to believe that Reid would deny that moral qualities of certain kinds might be causal in some more 'loose and popular' sense. Indeed, in one place, Reid talks of the causal efficacy of aesthetic qualities. See EIP VIII.iv: 604.

such kind. And suppose we assume, furthermore, that tokens of intentions, action-plans and beliefs of these sorts have a given moral feature by virtue of their satisfying or failing to satisfy one or another such norm. So, it is by virtue of the fact that Sam's intention to rebuke Melissa fails to satisfy various norms of morally decent behavior that it counts as being morally insensitive. If the broad outlines of this view are correct, then moral qualities aren't very different from other entities with which we are familiar. Tokens of home runs, portraits, ballets, and engines are all plausibly viewed as being such that they count as entities of their particular kind by virtue of their satisfying or failing to satisfy one or another relevant norm.

Most of us would not hesitate to affirm that we perceive things such as home runs, portraits, ballets and engines. I can sit in the left-field bleachers in Wrigley Field and watch Sammy Sosa knock a ball over the left field fence. I can lift up the hood of a Ford Mustang and peer at the engine. However, it is also commonly acknowledged that we typically perceive entities such as home runs, portraits, ballets, and engines only by virtue of perceiving and bearing causal relations to some of their constituent or determining features. When I watch Sosa knock a ball over the left field fence for a home run, I don't thereby perceive all the entities that constitute or determine Sosa's home run. Similarly, when I lift up the hood to the car to see if there's enough antifreeze in the radiator, I don't thereby perceive all the entities that constitute or determine that radiator. At best I perceive and bear causal relations to, only certain component or determining features of these entities. And so it is with most entities, including moral qualities of certain kinds. I perceive this expression of Sam's moral insensitivity by virtue of being aware of certain behavioral signs that manifest it. It may very well be that certain non-moral features that constitute this expression of Sam's insensitivity (e.g., his intending to rebuke Melissa) causally produce these behavioral patterns. If this is true, it's plausible to believe that I stand in an appropriate causal relation to only some constituent feature of this expression of Sam's insensitivity.<sup>48</sup> But that's sufficient, I submit, for satisfying any reasonable formulation of the 'causal requirement.'

To this I add two qualifications. I've claimed that there doesn't seem to be anything particularly objectionable about espousing the 'causal requirement' if it's interpreted loosely enough to allow for the fact that, when we perceive a given entity, our perceptual experience typically

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48 And if we are willing to admit that traits such as Sam's insensitivity are in some sense causally implicated in their own expression, then we can say that we also bear causal relations to them.

causally depends on only certain component or determining features of the entity we perceive. And while I'm inclined to believe that standing in a causal relation of some appropriate sort to an entity (or some component or determining feature thereof) is a necessary condition of apprehending (i.e., securing singular mental reference to) that entity in perception, I doubt that it's sufficient. So, I'm inclined to believe that, according to a Reidian account of moral perception, causal relations of this sort play at best a subsidiary role in determining mental reference to the moral qualities we perceive. To be sure, causal relations between a given moral quality (or the components or determining features thereof) and an agent must obtain if that agent is to grasp that quality by virtue of being aware of the various signs that signify it. But apprehension of a moral quality, at least in a wide variety of cases, I've claimed, is secured by grasping that quality by the apprehensive use of a given singular concept (or definite description) and by that concept's (or description's) being satisfied.

The second point I wish to add is this: throughout our discussion I have been concerned to develop an account of how a moral realist can explain how we have epistemic access to moral features of certain kinds. I've said nothing, however, about the epistemic status of the belief component of moral perception. That is, I've said nothing about whether the belief component of a given moral perception is ever justified, warranted, a case of knowledge, or the like. Although I've said nothing on this score, it seems to me that the basic account offered thus far can be readily extended to account for how some of our moral beliefs can be justified, warranted, or the like. One such account is Reidian in nature: if the belief component of a given moral perception is the upshot of reliable or properly functioning cognitive faculties operating in the appropriate environment, then (provided there are no undefeated defeaters) that belief is justified or warranted.<sup>49</sup> This is, of course, not the only account of warrant to which we can wed the present Reidian view.

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49 Reid himself claims that it is a 'first principle ... that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious' (EIP VI.v: 480). Elsewhere (EAP III.iii.vi: 231) Reid says that the moral faculty is an 'original' faculty of judgment and, thus, I assume 'natural.' In any event, if we follow William Alston, 'Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles,' *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985) 435-52, and interpret this principle to be an expression of Reid's broadly reliabilist position, then it follows that, in Reid's view, many of our moral beliefs are justified or warranted by virtue of their being produced by a reliable or properly functioning belief-forming faculty.

But it is, in my estimation, an attractive one, and suggests that the normative epistemic dimensions of the Reidian view lie close at hand.<sup>50</sup>

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