

How Morality Seems: A Cognitive Phenomenal Case for Moral Realism

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

Philosophers of mind have recently debated over whether or not there exists a unique cognitive phenomenology – a “what it’s like”-ness to our conscious cognitive mental states. Most of these debates have centered on the ontological question of whether or not cognitive phenomenology exists. I suggest that assuming cognitive phenomenology does exist, it would have important consequences for other areas of philosophy. In particular, it would have important consequences for moral epistemology – how we come to know the moral truths we seem to know. I argue that adopting cognitive phenomenology and the epistemic principle of phenomenal conservatism can do “double duty” for the moral realist: they provide the moral realist with *prima facie* grounds for belief in the objectivity of morality, while epistemically vindicating the specific contents of their beliefs.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

We seem to have moral knowledge – it seems to us that we know things like “murder is wrong,” where such knowledge is arguably more secure than knowledge of other sorts of facts. How we obtain moral knowledge is something of a mystery, however – it is not as if we can see moral properties or trip over moral facts walking down the street. We must come to possess moral knowledge through some way that does not depend on our senses. In this paper, I argue that the acquisition of moral knowledge has something to do with our conscious mental states. Thoughts about morality seem to have their own *cognitive phenomenology* – they seem to us a certain way when we think about them. I argue that the way they seem to us is in a certain sense objective, which gives us grounds for justified belief in the objectivity of morality.

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1. Introduction

Since the explosion of interest in consciousness within the philosophy of mind that has taken place over the past twenty years, there has been debate amongst philosophers as to just how far the reach of *phenomenal* consciousness stretches. A mental state is taken to be phenomenally conscious just in case there is “something it’s like” or a “what it’s like”-ness to be in that mental state. Phenomenal mental states have traditionally been reserved for sensory states, and perhaps understandably so: it seems clear that there’s something it’s like for me to stare up at a blue sky on a spring day (here, I might be said to be in a blue-ish phenomenal state). It’s less obvious that there is a unique what it’s like-ness for me to be in other sorts of mental states. Recently, however, this has begun to change with regard to the mental states associated with occurrent thought. Philosophers who endorse what is known as *cognitive phenomenology*¹ hold that there is a distinct phenomenal aspect to conscious cognitive states – and stronger versions of the claim take this phenomenal aspect to be *irreducible* to any phenomenal aspect that comes from the sensory modalities. If these philosophers are correct, then the upshot is that the rich, qualitative properties of consciousness are instantiated by cognitive as well as sensory states. This would have significant consequences for other philosophical issues related to cognitive mental states.²

One such issue that I propose would be affected is the issue of moral epistemology: how we come to know the putative moral truths that we do seem to know. One brand of moral realism, the ethical intuitionism associated with Michael Huemer, posits the principle of

¹ See Pitt (2004), Strawson (2011), and Siewert (2011).

² Besides the metaethical consequences for which I argue in this paper, other consequences that might turn on the existence of cognitive phenomenology include explaining how we come to have certain introspective self-knowledge, as well as opening up the possibility of phenomenal intentionality – the claim that we can explain the intentional content of conscious mental states by appealing to their phenomenal character. For more on the significance of cognitive phenomenology, see Smithies (2013).

phenomenal conservatism to argue that we have defeasible justification for belief in *P* based on *P*'s seeming to be true. If moral properties are *sui generis* and thus irreducible to natural properties, then the sensory faculties through which we typically detect natural properties can't be relied on to track properties of this sort. The justification for our moral beliefs must come from some other source; the ethical intuitionist thinks phenomenal conservatism is up to the task.

In this paper, I suggest that there are useful ways in which we might tie strands of these respective debates together to make a case for moral realism.³ If one buys the thesis that there is a distinct phenomenal property instantiated when one has a conscious occurrent thought, then such a phenomenal property might be instantiated when one has a conscious occurrent moral thought. I will argue that this phenomenal aspect present in occurrent moral thoughts or judgments, once paired with phenomenal conservatism, can and should be grist for the moral realist's mill – that the apprehension going on when one intuits a moral fact is a *phenomenal* apprehension. In particular, I will argue that adopting cognitive phenomenology and phenomenal conservatism can do double-duty for the moral realist: they give the realist *prima facie* grounds for believing in the objectivity of morality, while epistemologically vindicating the specific contents of the realist's moral beliefs.

The paper will proceed as follows: I first give a brief overview of the current cognitive phenomenology debate. I consider what are known as phenomenal contrast arguments, and claim that, while it's unclear whether or not one ought to endorse *irreducibly* cognitive phenomenology, phenomenal contrast arguments get at something important about how we experience conscious occurrent thoughts. I then consider how our phenomenology of conscious occurrent thought might be extended to moral thoughts, discuss how such phenomenology is

³ More precisely, my argument provides epistemological resources to the realist. These resources will be available to a variety of realist views, but may be most useful to "robust" forms of realism (Enoch 2011, FitzPatrick 2008) that are widely perceived to face significant epistemological challenges.

structured along the dimensions of attitude and content, and show that thoughts with moral content have “objective-ish” phenomenology. Finally, I show that the cognitive phenomenal character of conscious occurrent moral thoughts can be combined with (an extension of) phenomenal conservatism to give the moral realist defeasible justification for belief that the content of their moral beliefs is objectively true.

One point about this paper’s significance is worth mentioning. My case for normative realism diverges from other arguments for realism that invoke phenomenology. In chapter three of his *Taking Morality Seriously*, David Enoch argues for realism by arguing that the phenomenology of deliberation commits us to the existence of objective answers to normative questions over which we deliberate. By arguing from cognitive phenomenology and phenomenal conservatism, I give a case for realism that does not depend on the cluster of ambitious claims that Enoch wishes to make about the nature and epistemological significance of deliberative indispensability.

2. Cognitive Phenomenology and Phenomenal Contrast Arguments

I begin by giving an exposition of arguments for cognitive phenomenology and an explanation of the various commitments involved. Many philosophers have recently maintained that there is a “what it’s like”-ness when one has a conscious occurrent thought. These proponents of cognitive phenomenology hold that conscious thoughts — including beliefs, desires, judgments, and so on — have phenomenal character.

In order to be maximally clear as to what is at stake here, we ought to tread carefully when characterizing thoughts as “having phenomenal character.” What is it for a mental state to have phenomenal character? For the mental states associated with the senses, and those we enter into when in pain, it’s the qualitative character of experience picked out by the “what it’s like”

locution. When one has a conscious thought⁴, and that thought is said to have phenomenal character, proponents of cognitive phenomenology are not simply referring to the phenomenal character of the senses that the thought happens to be accompanied by in experience. So when one has the conscious occurrent thought, “The spring semester is ending soon,” and one happens to smell a blooming dogwood tree while tokening this thought, the phenomenal character of the thought is not *simply* the sensory phenomenal character of the accompanying smell. Rather, proponents typically mean something stronger: they mean that *the thought itself* possesses its own phenomenal character, and the phenomenology of conscious thought is not of the same *kind* as the phenomenology of the senses. We can refer to this claim as the following:

Proprietary Phenomenology: thoughts have phenomenal character, and their phenomenal character is different in kind from the phenomenal character of the mental states that are not thoughts

Proprietary Phenomenology holds that there are *different* kinds of phenomenally conscious mental states one can be in, and at least two of them include cognitive phenomenal states and sensory phenomenal states. Strawson (1994/2009) and Pitt (2004) appear to endorse Proprietary Phenomenology (this seems to be what Strawson gets at when he talks of our having “meaning experiences”). Proponents invoke arguments known as *phenomenal contrast arguments* to motivate Proprietary Phenomenology. These arguments are important to the cognitive phenomenology debate, and I discuss them in detail shortly.

In addition to Proprietary Phenomenology, there is another closely related but distinguishable thesis concerning the existence of cognitive phenomenology, namely:

Autonomy: thoughts have phenomenal character, and their phenomenal character is neither identical to nor grounded in the phenomenal character of mental states that are not thoughts

⁴ By “thought” I mean an intentional mental state, such as a “belief that” or “hope that”.

Autonomy is perhaps most naturally understood as the denial of a kind of reduction thesis. Suppose again one has the conscious occurrent thought, “The spring semester is ending soon.” When one introspects one’s phenomenology upon thinking this thought, one might have a certain mental image of springtime or of an academic building, or one might rehearse the thought verbally inside one’s head via inner speech. One also may have an emotional or proprioceptive *feeling* upon entertaining the thought. If this is what is going on phenomenally when one has a conscious occurrent thought, then opponents of cognitive phenomenology can deny Autonomy: they can say that any phenomenology occurring here is *reducible* to traditional sensory phenomenology. Indeed, this reductive move is often one that philosophers in opposition to cognitive phenomenology will make.⁵ Proponents of Autonomy deny reducibility: there is a phenomenal aspect to our conscious thoughts that is *irreducible* to sensory phenomenology. This question of reducibility seems to be what is at the heart of the cognitive phenomenology debate, though it is worth getting clear on whether or not denying Autonomy logically entails denying Proprietary Phenomenology.

Could one simultaneously accept Proprietary Phenomenology and deny Autonomy without penalty of contradiction? Proprietary Phenomenology states that the phenomenal character of thoughts (beliefs, desires, judgments) is different in kind than the phenomenal character of the (broadly construed) sensory modalities. Does accepting the claim that cognitive phenomenal properties and sensory phenomenal properties are different in *kind* commit one to the claim that the former are *irreducible* to the latter? At first blush, it does seem that holding Proprietary Phenomenology commits one to Autonomy. After all, if cognitive phenomenal properties ultimately reduce to sensory phenomenal properties, then how “different in kind” could they really be? Though perhaps this line of thinking is too quick. It’s not clear that two

⁵ See, for example, Tye and Wright (2011).

sorts of properties can't differ in kind while it still being the case that one ultimately reduces to the other. Consider, for instance, the plausible reduction of two-dimensional shape properties to zero or one-dimensional properties.⁶ Even if two-dimensional shape properties ultimately reduce to zero or one-dimensional properties, the former still seem intuitively different in kind than the latter. Analogously, perhaps cognitive phenomenal properties are similarly different in kind from sensory phenomenal properties. It's in this way that one might coherently accept Proprietary Phenomenology while denying Autonomy.

All of this is to say: it's not obvious what position we ought to come down on when considering the *ontological* foundations of cognitive phenomenology. It is a contingent fact about our introspective powers that we often lack the ability to discern our phenomenology – we simply run up against epistemic constraints when trying to individuate our phenomenal mental states along the cognitive-sensory divide. What counts as a phenomenal mental state? One natural thing to say is that it can be difficult, introspectively, to disentangle our sensory phenomenal states from our cognitive phenomenal states.⁷

With this in mind, let's now turn to positive arguments that are offered in support of cognitive phenomenology. Even if it's unclear where we should come down on the question of Proprietary Phenomenology or Autonomy, examining arguments given in their favor is instructive. Proponents of cognitive phenomenology use a battery of argumentative tactics in effort to show that any phenomenology associated with occurrent conscious thought is not exhausted by that of the sensory modalities. Some⁸ argue that we could not have the sort of

⁶ This example of reduction is given in Schroeder (2005).

⁷ Speaking for myself, I am sympathetic to both Proprietary Phenomenology and Autonomy, and will often speak as if both hold true throughout the paper. But, if opponents of cognitive phenomenology want to push back with regards to either Proprietary Phenomenology or Autonomy, I will not fight them on it. I believe my argument for moral realism can ultimately go through whether or not the phenomenology associated with moral thoughts is either uniquely cognitive or ultimately sensory in nature.

⁸ See for example, Pitt (2004).

introspective self-knowledge that we indeed seem to have about our own conscious thoughts if such thoughts did not possess some distinct phenomenal properties all their own. Others put forth what have come to be known as *phenomenal contrast arguments*.⁹ These arguments involve contrasting scenarios across which any sensory phenomenology appears to be constant and yet the subject still seems to undergo a difference in conscious experience. Phenomenal contrast arguments thus might be thought of as inferences to the best explanation arguments — something like cognitive phenomenology must be appealed to in order to explain the putative phenomenal change. Because I find contrast arguments to be particularly powerful at capturing what it is that the proponent of cognitive phenomenology is attempting to explain, I'll focus on them here.

Consider the following phenomenal contrast argument offered by Siewert:

I meet a friend, and she asks me, “Did you bring the book?” For a moment I am at a loss as to what book she’s talking about—and then I realize in an instant what book it is . . . But I didn’t say the title, even to myself, even partially, in the moment of realization, nor did I visualize the cover of the book. Though I needn’t, I might have said, a moment after realizing what she meant, “Oh, that book.” But that comes after the fact. Now I know what it’s like for me to realize suddenly what was meant on such occasions. So there is something it’s like. But now: there’s also no separable sensory feature I have, concurrent with the realization, of which I have subjective knowledge of what it is like to realize what was meant. Thus, there is a change in phenomenal character, but no relevant coincident change in sensory features separable from the advent of understanding. (Siewert 258)

The idea here is that there is a certain contrast between one’s mental states—one’s non-verbal, non-imagistic flash of understanding—that has all the markings of a change in phenomenal state. And yet, there doesn’t seem to be any concurrent change in qualitative states from the senses. It thus seems reasonable to conclude there is some sort of phenomenology present that isn’t grounded in sensory phenomenology, namely cognitive phenomenology. Another favorite

⁹ The first use of “phenomenal contrast” is from Siegel (2007). Siewert (2011) and Pitt (2004) offer phenomenal contrast arguments with regards to cognitive phenomenology. Chudnoff (2015b) gives a clear and useful categorization of phenomenal contrast arguments for cognitive phenomenology.

example championed by proponents of irreducibility is the alleged phenomenal change that occurs when one hears a word or phrase in a foreign language before one learns the language and when one hears the same word or phrase after learning the language.¹⁰ When one hears the phrase “Siempre me tomo un café por la mañana” before learning Spanish, one will enter into certain phenomenally conscious states, namely, certain auditory states as one attends to the sounds of the words. After one learns Spanish and hears the same phrase, the sensory phenomenology remains the same—and yet again, this doesn’t exhaust all phenomenally conscious aspects of the subject’s experience. One experiences a cognitive shift of understanding associated with hearing the phrase *as meaning* “I always drink coffee in the morning.” To restrict phenomenal states to the realm of the sensory modalities, then, would be to deny the existence of demonstrable features of our (phenomenally) conscious lives.¹¹

If contrast arguments give us good reason to believe that conscious occurrent thoughts have an irreducible phenomenal character, then we can take the further step of saying something about the nature of this phenomenal character. Sensory phenomenology is variously rich and contoured. There are contrasts between what it is like within the same sensory modality: compare the blue-ish phenomenal state I enter when looking up at the sky versus the green-ish phenomenal state I enter into when looking at a field of grass. Further, there are contrasts between what it is like across different sensory modalities: compare the phenomenal state I enter into when I smell coffee versus the phenomenal state I enter into when I taste coffee. It has been proposed that cognitive phenomenology might be similarly nuanced. If it is the case that conscious occurrent thoughts have an irreducible phenomenal character, then we should be open

¹⁰ Prinz (2011), referencing Siewert (1998), notes one such example.

¹¹ To be sure, those who believe that the cognitive phenomenal does reduce to the sensory phenomenal are unlikely to be convinced by phenomenal contrast strategies. Prinz (2011, 188) maintains that, if we introspect hard enough, we’ll find that there is some mental imagery associated with these shifts in phenomenal consciousness – such states are thus not irreducibly cognitive.

to the possibility of cognitive phenomenology being just as variously rich and contoured as sensory phenomenology. In particular, it has been suggested that cognitive phenomenology is variable along at least two dimensions: attitude and content.¹²

We can say that *attitude sensitivity* is the claim that holds the following: if two thoughts have different propositional attitudes towards the same (narrow) content (say, the hope that p and the belief that p), then they will differ with regard to their phenomenal character. So, if I hope that there is coffee in the kitchen at t_1 and I believe that there is coffee in the kitchen at t_2 , and attitude sensitivity is true, then my hope at t_1 and my belief at t_2 will differ in the phenomenal character. We can further stipulate *content sensitivity*¹³ as the following claim: if two thoughts have the same propositional attitude but differ in their (narrow) content (say, the belief that p and the belief that q), then they will differ with regard to their phenomenal character. So, if I believe that there is coffee in the kitchen at t_1 and I believe that there is water on Mars at t_2 , and content sensitivity is true, then my belief at t_1 and my belief at t_2 will differ in phenomenal character.

It is an open question whether we ought to endorse either attitude or content sensitivity. My belief is that at least sometimes, both changes in attitude and changes in content can result in changes in one's (cognitive) phenomenal state. I think that we can appeal to phenomenal contrast to show this. Because I find that attitude and cognitive sensitivity can explain certain features of our moral phenomenology, I will discuss them in the following section, where I turn to the phenomenology of conscious occurrent thoughts with moral content.

¹² This line of thought is offered by Bayne and Montague (2011). Thanks to Kelly Trogon for helping me see the relevance of this distinction between attitude and content.

¹³ This is closely related to the thesis of phenomenal intentionality. For more on phenomenal intentionality, see Horgan and Tienson (2002) and Loar (2003).

3. A Moral Phenomenal Contrast Argument¹⁴

Is there a “what-it’s-like”-ness to entertaining a moral thought, making a moral judgment, or holding a moral belief? There is a burgeoning literature revolving around what’s called *moral phenomenology* where philosophers have argued for answering this question in the affirmative.¹⁵ In what follows, I’ll try to show that, if there is something it’s like to have a conscious occurrent thought, then this should include our moral thoughts.¹⁶ I will do this by appealing to cases, which I will now introduce. Cases like these lend support for what I’ll call *moral phenomenal contrast arguments*.

Consider the case of Rachel. Rachel is a prudent college student who is enrolled in a philosophy class. She is also increasingly concerned with her eating habits. She decides that it is in her best interest if she cuts out meat from her diet. She reasons that nothing will be lost, and much will be gained, if she makes this change in lifestyle. She has a conscious occurrent thought: “I should not eat meat.” She may even write that very sentence down on a piece of paper, or make a note of it on her computer. Some time after having this thought, after she has finished her philosophy course and ruminated on all that she has learned, Rachel undergoes a shift with regards to her obligation of not eating meat. No longer does she think that she ought to not eat meat for her own sake – because doing so would be the prudent thing to do, the course of action that is in her best interest. Rather, Rachel now thinks that she should refrain from eating meat because *it’s the right thing to do*. The thought now seems to be the manifestation of a moral commitment that she has adopted. With this newfound moral commitment, Rachel comes across the note she

¹⁴ For purposes of this paper, I set aside the related issue of whether or not our contact with moral properties is a matter of *perception*. For more on moral perception, see Audi (2013) and Faraci (2015).

¹⁵ See Horgan and Timmons (2005, 2008) and Kriegel (2008, 2015).

¹⁶ As Kriegel (2015) notes, part of the reason philosophers might be resistant to exploring the putative “what it’s like”-ness of occurrent moral thought is that it’s unclear exactly what mental states are involved when a moral agent does things like make a moral judgment or entertain a moral thought. Kriegel’s own tactic is to treat moral commitments as manifesting themselves as occurrent conscious thoughts about morality. I follow his lead to this extent here.

wrote to herself before, and reads it: “I should not eat meat.” Suppose, as is plausible to do, that there is no change in mental imagery or emotional feeling associated with her reading the note either before or after the adoption of the moral commitment.¹⁷ Let us also suppose that she doesn’t necessarily read the words to herself in inner speech. The question is: is there some difference in what-it’s-like for Rachel to have the occurrent conscious thoughts she has as she reads the note before and after taking on the moral commitment she adopts? If so, would this phenomenal difference be wholly accounted for by the sensory modalities?

It seems to me that there is a genuine phenomenal contrast for Rachel before and after she takes on the moral commitment that she ought not eat meat. When Rachel has the conscious occurrent thought when it is only a prudential commitment, the thought might be said to *feel* or *seem* to her a certain way – and it is this aspect that changes after she “sees” the thought as a moral commitment. How does the conscious occurrent thought feel under this latter aspect? According to Kriegel, the thought feels or seems *objective* in a phenomenally discrete way:

It is an interesting question, however, what *makes* [cognitivism] antecedently plausible. One answer . . . is that the objective purport of moral commitments is *phenomenologically* manifest, in that what it is like for a subject to have (a conscious manifestation of) a moral commitment often involves a feeling as of homing in on an objective matter of fact. (Kriegel 2015, 160)

Upon introspection of our occurrent conscious thoughts about morality, the feeling or seeming of objectivity Kriegel describes rings accurate. When our genuinely moral commitments are presented to us in consciousness, our corresponding manifest beliefs seem to have a “pull,” or normative thrust. For the moral agent, this normative thrust will be *phenomenally present*. One might object that the contrast described here isn’t as sharp as the earlier cases. Because the alleged contrast between Rachel’s occurrent thought before and after she understands her

¹⁷ Though Prinz (2011) would object: that at least part of what explains the phenomenal contrast is a change in emotion.

commitments as moral rather than prudential doesn't seem to be as distinct as the contrast between the phenomenal shift when I hear a phrase before and after I learn a foreign language, any change going on in the former case may not be best described as phenomenal. My response: it's far from obvious that the difference in phenomenal states must be as distinct as that described in the foreign language case. It is not a necessary condition that the phenomenal contrast is as sharp as black and white to count as a genuine phenomenal contrast; on the contrary, it is reasonable to think that close attention to the various phenomenal contours that are given to us in consciousness will reveal that they are more comparable to different shades of gray. Given the alleged difference in phenomenal contrast between the case of Rachel and the foreign language case, we might ask: is the best explanation of this difference that there is *no* distinctive phenomenology present in the former, or merely *less* distinctive phenomenology? Careful introspection, to my mind, suggests the latter—there is a phenomenal contrast in the case of the Rachel, even if a less vivid one.

Recall that in the previous section, it was speculated that if phenomenal contrast arguments give us reason to think that conscious occurrent thoughts have phenomenal character that is different than sensory phenomenal character, then such cognitive phenomenal character might vary along the dimensions of attitude and content. We can now assess whether or not we ought to endorse attitude sensitivity or content sensitivity with regards to our conscious occurrent moral thoughts by further investigating the phenomenal differences in the case of Rachel.

Attitude sensitivity holds that if two thoughts have different propositional attitudes towards the same (narrow) content (say, the hope that *p* and the belief that *p*), then they will differ with regard to their phenomenal character. It seems plausible that Rachel undergoes a shift

in attitude from before she takes on not eating meat as a moral commitment to after she takes it on. In particular, it seems comparable to the shift in attitude that one undergoes from *entertaining* some content p and *believing* some content p (though it may not be comparable due to the fact that Rachel as I've described her undergoes a shift in the content of her thought; more on this below). Consider the shift in attitude one undergoes when they are merely entertaining the thought with content "The death penalty is wrong" (say, perhaps, in a philosophy classroom) and when one later genuinely believes the same content and the thought is consciously manifested. It seems to me that this change in attitude will result in a change in phenomenal state. If Rachel's shift in attitude is comparable to the death penalty case, then it seems that her change in attitude does at least partially contribute to her change in phenomenal state.

Content sensitivity holds that if two thoughts have the same propositional attitude but differ in their (narrow) content (say, the belief that p and the belief that q), then they will differ with regard to their phenomenal character. It again seems plausible that there is a shift in the content of the thought before and after she takes on her moral commitment not to eat meat. In particular, the thought before the adoption of the moral commitment is, "I (prudentially) should not eat meat," while the thought after the adoption of the moral commitment is, "I (morally) should not eat meat." One can token either of these thoughts by using the same words. It is thus natural to think that this change in content will result in a change in phenomenal state. Thinking about the case in this way, the (cognitive) phenomenology of objectivity seems to go along with the content. Suppose Rachel has the attitude of wondering toward the content "Should I eat meat?" Here again, she seems to be wondering about an objective subject matter. The phenomenology of objectivity does not change across different attitude types, but rather tracks the moral content of the thought itself. If this is an accurate interpretation of what is going on in

the case of Rachel, then it seems that the change in her thought content at least partially contributes to her change in phenomenal state.

I believe that if you introspect on your own experience when tokening a conscious occurrent thought with moral content, especially one that you genuinely *believe* as opposed to merely entertain, then you will enter into a similar phenomenal state into which Rachel enters. I am thus inclined to think that both changes in attitude and changes in content at least partially contribute to the change in Rachel's phenomenal state. When one has the phenomenal experience of apprehending a moral truth, one feels as if they are getting at something objective about the world. This phenomenal change seems to be structured along cognitive dimensions, and not wholly constituted by sensory changes.

4. Phenomenal Conservatism

If there is a unique cognitive phenomenology of objectivity that we can attend to when having an occurrent moral thought, what is the epistemic status of this thought? When Rachel has the thought, "I should not eat meat," and this thought is accompanied with a phenomenal seeming of objectivity, does this tell us anything about whether our moral beliefs constitute knowledge? To answer these questions, I propose recruiting the services of an epistemic principle that has gained traction in recent years: phenomenal conservatism. Phenomenal conservatism was first introduced by Michael Huemer, who has defined it as follows: in the absence of defeaters, *S*'s belief that *P* is justified to some degree if it is based on *S*'s seeming that *P*.¹⁸ For those who accept phenomenal conservatism, the way in which something *seems* or *appears* to a subject offers at least some justification for believing it.

¹⁸ As stated here, this is what Huemer describes as the *doxastic* justification version of phenomenal conservatism; this is slightly different than the *propositional* justification version, to which it corresponds.

As far as epistemological theories go, phenomenal conservatism has many virtues. It offers a clear foundationalist account of justification in that our beliefs can be non-inferentially justified (the source of justification is just how a belief seems to us, rather than some further belief). It also provides a clear way of responding to the skeptic, as mere appearances stand as *prima facie* grounds for justification despite no independent evidence that the subject is not in a skeptical situation. Moreover, phenomenal conservatism offers a unified account of justification for different types of beliefs — perceptual beliefs, a priori beliefs, and indeed moral beliefs can all be non-inferentially justified under a single principle.

Phenomenal conservatism treats *seemings* as epistemically basic. There is debate as to precisely what the nature of seemings is. Because our goal is to ultimately see what lessons can be learned from considering how an occurrent moral thought *seems* to a subject, it is worth considering this issue in detail. Some hold that seemings are beliefs, or inclinations to believe. These views, however, don't appear to capture how many advocates of phenomenal conservatism employ seemings (it could seem to *S* that *P* without *S* believing, or having the inclination to believe, that *P*). The more popular conception of seemings is what Moretti calls the experience view. On this view, for *S* to have a seeming that *P* is for *S* to have a *sui generis* *experience* with propositional content. Such experiences, as Moretti describes, are

characterized by distinctive phenomenology that makes them represent their contents *assertively*. This phenomenology can be described as the feeling of ascertaining that a given proposition is true, or the feeling of being directly presented with the truth of a proposition (Moretti 299).

When one has a seeming, one has a certain experience with assertive phenomenology. We can interpret Moretti's claim here by invoking our prior attitude/content framework: to have a seeming experience is to have a propositional attitude type – an intuition – that has assertive phenomenology. The idea that a particular attitude type has a particular phenomenology is

consistent with our above discussion of attitude sensitivity. But, if we are on the right track in thinking that cognitive phenomenology is sensitive to *both* changes in attitude and changes in thought content, then it is not the case that phenomenology adheres only to seemings qua attitude types, but also to the *contents* of states with *any* sort of attitude type.¹⁹

To this end, I propose an extension of phenomenal conservatism from the seemings-qua-attitude version of the view to a default epistemic position for *all* seemings – including those seemings associated with content. A seeming, after all, is just a phenomenal state. The classic sort is an attitude type (the type characterized by a proposition P phenomenally presenting as true), but we can extend phenomenal conservatism to a general epistemic stance of default trust in our phenomenological reception of the world. This preserves the core idea of phenomenal conservatism, that phenomenology quite generally serves as a default justifier.

Suppose that Rachel has a seeming experience when she comes to understand “Eating meat is wrong” as a moral truth. As my extension of phenomenal conservatism would have it, this seeming experience – her experience where things present themselves as true – would be justified by default (in the absence of defeaters). The thought may be *prima facie* justified based either on the phenomenology of its components – either the phenomenology of the attitude one takes to the content (Rachel’s initial intuition attitude-type, or, perhaps later, her belief attitude-type) or the phenomenology of the content itself. The presentational or assertive phenomenology that accompanies intuition attitude types may be doing the justificatory work. But, if there is a phenomenology of objectivity associated with the moral *content* of the thought, then this will be present regardless of what the attitude type is. This way, phenomenology embedded in a mental state that is not an intuition can justify. However we might describe the phenomenology of

¹⁹ Thanks to Tristram McPherson for helping me see this point.

Rachel's attitude type, be it assertive or otherwise, when she is tokening the content of "it is wrong to eat meat," this will *seem* like an objective feature of the world.

The phenomenology of objectivity that is characteristic of moral content thus gives the moral realist *prima facie* grounds for believing in the objectivity of morality. When this characteristic phenomenology is coupled with phenomenal conservatism, the realist has defeasible justification for believing that there exist objective moral truths. Moreover, there is an added payoff: the realist is not only *prima facie* justified in believing that there are *some* objective moral truths, but objective moral truths with particular content – namely, just those that have the phenomenology of objectivity.

Before concluding, one further consideration deserves mention. First, something should be said for the "absent defeaters" clause present in the formulation of phenomenal conservatism. The moral realist is justified in believing the moral contents of her thought as the content is accompanied by a particular phenomenology of objectivity – unless, it is supposed, there is some defeater offering a countervailing explanation as to *why* the moral thought content is accompanied by the phenomenology of objectivity. One possible defeater that comes readily to mind in this case is that of evolutionary debunking arguments.²⁰ If debunking arguments are correct, then there is a clear countervailing explanation as to why thoughts with moral content are accompanied by phenomenology of objectivity: because belief in morality is evolutionarily beneficial. Much has been written on evolutionary debunking arguments, and a full treatment of the issue would take us too far afield. For now, it will suffice to say that it's not obvious that debunking arguments can play a defeating role for why moral content has a characteristic phenomenology of objectivity. Accepting debunking arguments may in fact lead to a complete

²⁰ See Street (2006) and Joyce (2007).

upheaval of our evaluative beliefs²¹ or do not sufficiently cast doubt on our moral beliefs' positive epistemic status.²²

5. Conclusion

The debate over the autonomy and reducibility of cognitive phenomenology isn't likely to be settled anytime soon. As Bayne (2009) notes, the split between those who want to extend the reach of phenomenal consciousness to thoughts and those who want to restrict it to the domain of the senses is, if anything, widening. In this paper, I've shown that we can bracket this ontological question of whether or not purely cognitive phenomenal properties exist, and focus instead on how the phenomenology associated with conscious occurrent thought might be structured (along dimensions of propositional attitude and content) to still make philosophical progress. If I have been successful, then I've shown that we can combine cognitive phenomenology with phenomenal conservatism to offer a novel argument for moral realism, as well as shown that cognitive phenomenology can be a fruitful conceptual tool for metaethics generally.

²¹ See Kahane (2011).

²² See Shafer-Landau (2012).

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