

## Article

# The Sophisticated and Naive View of Moral Experience

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I draw a contrast between two ways of posing the question of moral experience: the episodic and the contemplative. On the first, the episodic outlook, the question of moral experience is the question of specifying the workings of a capacity (or set of capacities) whose exercise may ground claims of moral knowledge. On the contemplative outlook, on the other hand, the question of understanding moral experience is the question of articulating a standpoint: the moral standpoint. On this view, philosophical reflection on moral experience aims to shed light on the human experiences that paradigmatically exemplify and, thus, best reveal the moral standpoint. In the tradition of contemplative accounts, I propose that some of the human experiences that paradigmatically exemplify and reveal the moral standpoint are experiences of “moral growth and change”. Finally, I argue that in “moral growth and change”, one is in view of the world as what is at stake. This leads to a different sense in which moral experience grounds knowledge claims.

**Keywords:** moral perception; moral experience; episodic; contemplative; McDowell; Murdoch

## 1. The Question of Moral Experience

The question of what morality demands of us is, we might say, as much a question of how to act in the world as a question of how to take the world. We might articulate the thought by saying that it is as much a question of moral action as a question of moral experience. The aim of this paper is to characterize a view of moral experience that is often simply assumed in the literature and to sketch an alternative that is forthcoming in a number of works, but perhaps less clearly or forcefully than one might like.

In one manner of speaking, we say things such as: “Experience shows me this” or, “I know this from experience”. Moral philosophers typically assume that we should understand these locutions on the model of locutions of the following sort: “I know that this object has such and such properties because I perceive/am sensibly affected by these properties”, or, “I know that this object exists in the world because sense-perception shows it to me”, or, “I know that x will be the case because I have experienced y in the past”, so that, “I know this from experience” in the moral case would amount to saying, “I know that x is y because I perceive y”, where y is a moral property, or, “I know that moral value exists in the world because sense-experience shows it to me”, or, “I know that x is good/right/etc. because I have experienced the goodness/rightness/etc. of other x-s in the past”. For instance, “I know that the kids’ torturing the cat is wrong, because I perceive the wrongness of what they do”, or, “I know that there is injustice in our world because I can see it”, or, “I know that giving to charity is good because I have experienced its overwhelmingly good consequences in the past”. On this use of the term, in locutions of the form, “I know this from experience”, “experience” is an uncountable noun and “this” is substitutable with a propositional claim of the form, “That this is what I ought to do/good/beneficial/etc.”, or, “That goodness/justice/etc. exists in the world”, or, “X will be good/just/beneficial/etc.” What the uncountable noun represents is a distinctive receptive capacity—often referred to in the literature as *moral perception*—whose exercise grounds moral knowledge, in something like the way that the exercise of ordinary sense reception grounds theoretical/empirical knowledge of the world: it shows that an object has a property, or that an object is part of the external reality, or that a prediction or causal



**Citation:** Mylonaki, E. The Sophisticated and Naive View of Moral Experience. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 72. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8040072>

Academic Editor: Robert Cowan

Received: 18 April 2023

Revised: 19 June 2023

Accepted: 29 July 2023

Published: 8 August 2023



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hypothesis is sound. I will call this use of the term “experience” *sophisticated*, to point out the fact that it is descendant from a philosophical view of knowledge—the empiricist view—and to contrast it with what I take to be the naïve use of “experience”.

In another manner of speaking, we say things such as, “It was an experience of great injustice”, “A study of the experiences of health-care workers in COVID clinics”, “Human life includes a variety of experiences”, “Talk to me about your experiences in the war”, etc.. On this usage, “experience” is a countable noun. What this countable noun represents is *not* the internally undifferentiated workings of a capacity, but specific happenings in people’s lives or specific aspects of their lives, which bear the mark of the moral. I call this usage *naïve* to signify the fact that it does not descend from a philosophical view and to contrast it with the sophisticated use above. Philosophers who privilege the naïve use of the term “experience” in the moral case tend to think that a careful exploration of some of the human experiences may amount to an elucidation of the moral standpoint and the questions of morality.

My aim in the first part of the paper is to characterize accounts that favor the sophisticated representation of moral experience. I shall call these accounts *episodic* for reasons that will emerge in that section. In the second part, I take up the dissenting accounts that favor the naïve representation of moral experience. I will call these *contemplative* for reasons that will emerge there. I shall end this paper with a brief sketch of a contemplative account of my own.

## 2. The Episodic View of Moral Experience

Philosophers who favor the sophisticated representation of moral experience have typically approached the issue in one (or both) of two related ways: (1) as an issue regarding the objectivity of moral knowledge; (2) as an issue regarding the rationality of moral thought. Those who address the issue in the former way tend to formulate the issue through the analogy of the objectivity of empirical knowledge: moral thought should be shown to be objective in the way that knowledge of nature is objective. To achieve this objectivity, they try to ground moral knowledge claims on a certain sensitivity to reality. Depending on the theory, this sensitivity is either *modelled* on ordinary perception or it is conceived as *related* to or *based* on ordinary perception. In his introduction to *Moral Perception*, for instance, Robert Audi [1] (2013) writes:

If this overall project succeeds in the way I intend, it provides a foundation for affirming the possibility of moral knowledge that is, on the one hand, based on perception and hence empirical and, on the other hand, comprehensible in terms of a framework of a priori moral principles that are not empirical and are knowable by reflection. (p. 4)

On the other hand, philosophers who regard moral experience in terms of the rationality of moral thought tend to treat it as the issue of the proper attention to the particular case. In this context, it is suggested that only careful and sensitive observation of the particulars in one’s circumstances will give rise to a morally appropriate response to a reason-giving situation. Of course, one often applies rules of thumb, but in doing so, one *mimics* the genuine operation of moral reason, which is the apprehension of particulars. On such views, to grasp the reasons that there are is to be affected by the particulars of a situation in something like the way one is affected by objects and their features in sense perception. Thus, one knows what reasons one has in a situation because one is, in some manner, sensitive to the reasons or the reason giving features of the situation. In other words because one’s capacity for the apprehension of reasons is activated in something like the way one’s capacity for sensible receptivity is passively activated in ordinary sensible receptivity. Depending on the theory, philosophers explain this apprehension either as the exercise of a faculty that is advanced enough to grasp the “subtleties of a complex, ethical situation” [2] (pp. 172–173) or as the exercise of a multiplicity of psychic processes and capacities [3] (p. 47). For instance, Blum (1994) [3] (p. 46) thinks that moral experience is no more than one’s sensitivity to the particulars of a situation when one possesses certain

moral categories (p. 37) or has a certain moral character. In this spirit, Blum (1994) writes: “I argue also that moral perception should not be conceived of as a united capacity, but that it involves multifarious moral and psychological *processes*” ([3] p. 31, my emphasis). Later in the same passage, Blum (1994) highlights “the importance of the *operation* of moral perception” ([3] p. 31, my emphasis).

Despite their many differences, the above theories take the empiricist paradigm of knowledge from experience to be central in their accounts of moral experience. Whether it is moral properties and objects in the world or reasons and reason-giving features of situations in the world, the function of moral experience is understood on the basis of the function of sense perception: it is supposed to be what provides *the evidence, the ground, the justification* for holding a certain belief or making a knowledge claim about what there is in the world or for formulating a hypothesis about what is going to happen in the world. And if moral experience is to bear this evidential, or grounding, or justificatory relation to a belief or knowledge claim, it itself must be conceived of as the activation of a capacity, or set thereof, to receive a part or aspect of the world, only this time, the moral part or aspect of the world. On one prevalent account, one receives the moral part or aspect of the world by having moral concepts activated in one’s receptivity. In particular, the moral concepts (moral conceptions, outlooks, principles, etc.) that are in active service in a moral knowledge claim are the concepts that are passively activated in the operation of the receptive capacity that grounds this claim. It is this activation that is ultimately responsible for delivering *objective* or *rational* contents for knowledge.

Thus, the question of moral experience becomes the metaethical *technical* question of *how (moral) concepts may be activated in the exercise of the agent’s sensible receptive capacity*. In this spirit, philosophers such as McGrath [4] (2004), Watkins and Jolley [5] (2002), McBrayer [6] (2010), Cowan [7] (2009), and Wright [8] (2008) define perception in general as conceptually laden. They, then, distinguish between low- and high-order perceptibles in accordance with the degree of conceptual sophistication involved in the perceiving. In the resulting picture, moral perception is ordinary sensible or quasi-sensible reception in which highly sophisticated conceptual skills are activated. To use a well-known example from Watkins and Jolley [5] (2002), when a vintner tastes wine, their explanation of the wine’s quality depends on the conceptual refinement of their tasting skills. In the moral case, as well, it is suggested, the subject has matured to include in their conceptual repertoire refined moral skills that can get activated in their perceptual experience.

The analogy of the vintner is very telling here. It is supposed to show that, in the case of moral perception as well, only a very skilled and conceptually sophisticated moral agent can have the concepts with which to grasp the intricacies and subtleties of our moral situation in the world. We are accustomed to images of morality as a domain of knowables in which it makes sense to speak of expert perception: perception whose progression towards the ideal—whose deepening and maturation—is a matter of the refinement and the sophistication of methods and skills in knowing a special domain. There are, after all, trained ethicists working in hospitals and in business. This tempts us to think that as a radiologist can see lungs and tumors when all we can see is light and shaded areas, a trained ethicist can see sophisticated moral dilemmas when all we can see is people in need. The assumption here is that the nature and quality of one’s experience is, to a large extent, dependent on moral expertise; the capacity to acquire increasingly sophisticated tools and methods of acquiring knowledge that are domain-specific.

Accounts that favor a sophisticated representation of moral experience, thus, assume or embrace an *episodic conception of moral experience*. This is a conception of moral experience as a distinct and occasional process that occurs in the interval of two relatively well-defined temporal boundaries. The process is at least notionally distinct from the believing or acting, which manifests the relevant moral knowledge claim each time: it is what grounds or justifies the moral knowledge claim. The process is occasional in that it consists of the passive activation of dedicated moral concepts in sensible receptivity, an activation that only happens when one is in the presence of a moral situation, or object, or property, which

is not and cannot be *always* or *continually*, in the same way that one is, generally speaking, not always or continually activating skilled capacities. The first temporal boundary of this process is the passive activation of moral concepts in the exercise of sensible receptivity. The second temporal boundary is the active formulation of a knowledge claim, either in reaching a belief or an action, which employs the material—the selection of moral concepts for the circumstances—received in moral experience.

On the episodic view, moral experience acquires the following features: (1) It becomes ahistorical. It is true that, as one grows and as one changes, the moral concepts that penetrate the operation of one's sensible or quasi-sensible receptivity may themselves grow and change. However, the process itself, the *experiencing*, if you like, does not evolve, deepen, or mature. It persists the same through the passage of time: each time it starts anew with the passive activation of moral concepts and ends with the deliverance of contents for moral knowledge claims, knowledge claims embodied in believing or acting. (2) It (moral experience) becomes a matter of conceptual virtuosity or expertise. The more refined one's conceptual skills, the more refined one's conceptual repertoire that is activated in episodes of moral perception, the more accurate and fine-tuned the grasp of the intricacies and subtleties of one's moral situation in the world is. (3) It (moral experience) becomes the inner—the process of the activation of one's powers—which is supposed to lead to and ground the outer: the words and actions that manifestly embody our knowledge. We form and adjust our claims to knowledge in what we say and do in the public world, based on how powers internal to our constitution are activated by the moral part or aspect of the world.

### 3. Moving Away from the Episodic View

In tracing the defining features of the episodic view of moral experience, we may use the image of a lens to describe the operation of moral concepts in the sensible reception of circumstances. Thus, following Blum's conception of moral perception, we may say that the agent who *has* the concept of "racism" or "racial discrimination" is equipped with a certain lens through which things become perceptually available to them, that is available as they are. However, one will soon notice that a given agent may at any time have more than one such lens. Thus, the issue of what it is to *have* these lenses—the concepts that allow someone to see things as they are—cannot be a mere matter of the *operation* or *activation* of these lenses in particular circumstances. What it is to have these lenses must be a matter of knowing what concept or combination of concepts *adequately/appropriately* presents one with the reality of the situation each time.

If the issue of moral perception is at least in part the issue of which lens or concept is *suitable* for presenting the reality of the situation each time, then the philosophical significance of moral perception cannot be exhausted in the technical question (how concepts may be activated in the exercise of the agent's sensible receptive capacity), as in the views towards the end of Section 2 above. A philosophical account must address the renewed question of how a concept may be activated in sensible reception *as suitable for the circumstances*. In this section, I argue that philosophical elaboration on this question changes the field for the question of moral experience.

The account that addresses this question head on is John McDowell's [9] and David Wiggins's [10] view of moral perception as the sensitivity to salience. One of McDowell's [9] (1979) central ideas is that, when drawing upon a moral concept, one's perception does not involve the mere activation of a partial conception, such as "racism" in Blum's example. Instead, for McDowell [9] (1979), concepts are drawn in in moral experience *as the right concepts for the circumstances* because they are drawn in as the agent's *entire* conception of how to live (their "conception of the sort of life a human being should live" (pp. 66–67)). To modify Blum's example, think of the agent who protests racist behavior in the face of physical danger: this is the agent who, in current terms, sees the situation through the "lens" of "racism". In this view, the agent's conception of how it befits a human being to live presents itself under the circumstances as, say, the apprehension that a physical threat is no

reason to keep silent. In this modified example, the practical employment of one concept in the circumstances silences another concept that might be active in other circumstances. The fact that the practical employment of one concept silences another shows that it is not an isolated concept of “racism” that is at work here, but the concept *as a conception of how it befits a human being to live in the circumstances*. Thus, inquiries into the agent’s actions in the example may elicit the following answer: “It does not befit a human being to fret over her safety when humanity itself is at risk.” The thought in a nutshell is this: in moral experience, a concept may be active in the sensible reception of reality *as appropriate for the circumstances*, because in the circumstances, it is active as *their view of the whole*.

However, this idea raises the following question: *What exactly is the nature of this view of the whole?* If one’s view of the whole is just a conception of the life worth living, on par with the conceptions it governs, then, in the light of the above thought, we should be able to explain its own workings as *appropriate* for the circumstances. This should, in turn, be explained in terms of the subject’s being in view of an even larger whole, and so on and so forth ad infinitum. McDowell (1979) [9] (pp. 67–68) speaks of the agent’s “entire conception of the good life,” or of their “conception of how to live”. However, we are not meant to understand this as a pre-determined, overarching conception that codifies a particular hierarchy of moral concepts or principles that mechanically yields a selection in each situation [9] (pp. 68–71). Instead, we are to understand this as no less than the shape of our capacity to recognize reasons, a shape into which we have been habituated in upbringing by having both our intellectual and motivational propensities molded a certain way. It is this capacity which may take the shape of *this* concern in one circumstance and the shape of *that* concern in another, so that one’s view of the whole, in the case of moral experience, is no less than the shape of one’s rationality; one’s ability to grasp and respond to reasons; one’s ability to see reasons; and not merely one specialized conception among others.

However, if this is what is required in order to understand the activation of concepts in moral experience and to resolve the problem of infinite regress that the sophisticated accounts face, then it is not clear that we can understand moral experience as the activation of dedicated moral concepts in sensible receptivity. In other words, if in order to understand the experience of *salience* that McDowell and Wiggins make so much of, we must invoke the shape of one’s rationality as such (the entire set of one’s intellectual and motivational propensities), then the sense in which moral experience is episodic falls out as trivial. For, on such a view, each and every single one of one’s experiences might count as a moral experience, depending on the circumstances. But this raises afresh the question of what is worthy of the name *moral experience* if each and every single one of our experiences might count as moral.

The question seems pressing because we are assuming an episodic conception of experience. If we drop the episodic view, the anxiety falls out and we are free to embrace the thought that, yes, every single one of our experiences is potentially such as to count as moral. In the following section, I turn to accounts of moral experience that drop the episodic view.

#### 4. The Contemplative View of Moral Experience

I believe that we may answer the question above if we turn to the work of a growing number of philosophers who offer us an altogether different way of looking at moral experience. I said in Section 3 that on accounts that embrace an episodic view of moral experience, moral experience becomes ahistorical, inner, and sophisticated. However, this picture does not do justice to the richness and significance of moral experience in human life. We are held captive by a picture, as Wittgenstein might say, a picture that presents moral experience as ahistorical, inner, and sophisticated, when in fact, moral experiences are historical through and through, as Murdoch might say; they are ours without needing to be inner and contemplative without needing to be conceptually sophisticated. We find, I think, this notion of experience, explicitly or not, in the work of a growing number of moral



philosophers, in the work of Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, Jonathan Lear, Raimond Gaita, Carla Bagnoli, and Sophie-Grace Chappell [11]. On the naïve view, the representations of moral experience we should be focusing on are naïve formulations of the form, “It was an experience of great injustice”, “A study of the (moral) experiences of health-care workers”, “Human life includes a great variety of (moral) experiences”, “Talk to me about your experiences in the war”, etc. As Cora Diamond suggests (Diamond, [12] 2020), the sense of experience at work here is the sense of experience at work when high-school students are asked to write about the most-interesting experiences they have had, to which they could respond by writing about swimming the English Channel, giving birth to triplets, interviewing the president, or being stranded for a week in Afghanistan.

Likewise, if we were asked about the most horrible experiences we have had, we might describe a great injustice, the terminal illness of a loved one, a long period of mourning over some loss, etc. If we were asked about the most-wonderful experiences we have had, we might describe the victorious fight over civil rights matters, a love affair, the raising of our children, etc. In all these cases, the term “experience” would unproblematically be used to denote what is going on or went on *in one’s life* over a period of time. For instance, when in answer to a question about a horrible experience, one goes on to describe the terminal illness of a loved one, one may say things about the condition of the loved one and about the way the condition’s symptoms progressed as time went on; one may say things about the home or hospice the loved one was placed in and about the people who work there and the way they treated the loved on; one may say things about meetings with medical practitioners and going on online forums; one may say things about how one did not have emotions about anything at the time because what was going on was too much or that one felt numb or overwhelmed; one may say things about how often one visited the loved one and what one tried to do to ease their suffering; one may say things about feeling guilt at one’s own inadequacy as a caretaker or anger at the neoliberal attack on the welfare state; one may say things about how this affected the rest of one’s relations and preoccupations; one may say things about what the loved one meant to them and how easy or complicated the relationship with them had, up to that point, been; one may say things about reaching the middle of life or the meaning of life. In this case, *saying* what one’s experience was includes no less than medical descriptions, descriptions of places and people, descriptions of emotions or feelings, descriptions of relationships, of habits, of behaviors, descriptions of defense mechanisms, descriptions of existential questions, and so on.

Unlike what the sophisticated moral philosopher might expect, one’s experience in this case is not the activation of a generic ahistorical process (the activation of a mechanism capable of offering the knowing self the necessary material with which to believe and act), but a *manifold* of processes, relationships, institutions, people, questions, states, etc., in all their particularity and social and political situatedness. Thus, the experience of the terminal illness of a loved one cannot be the same now as it used to be in the 1950s, nor can it be the same in Greece as it is in the U.K., neither can it be the same for a wealthy Greek as it is for a poor Greek, and so on and so forth. Moral experiences in this sense are historical through and through. Moreover, unlike what the sophisticated philosopher might expect, one’s experience in such a case is not an occasional happening, such as the functioning of machinery, or a mechanism, or a skilled capacity that may be switched on and off in the course of living. It is, on the contrary, the description of some—any, really—bits of reality in so far as they are *lived*; that is, in so far as they are taken up in a certain way: as answering the question of *what is going on with one* or *what one’s life is like over a period of time*. For instance, even while now, I am writing this, trying to think along with you about moral experience and its many kinds, if you ask me about my experience here and if I were to be honest with you, I would have to talk to you about how this paper came at a time in my life when my mother has been really sick. I would have to be honest about the fact that writing this paper is taken up by me, lived so to speak, experienced under the guise of the terminal illness of a loved one: this paper is both how I forget myself and my life and how I am reminded of myself and my life, and this is my *experience* writing

it. Thus, when I talk to you about my experience, I talk not of powers, or mechanisms, or sensitivities that may be switched on and off, set in motion, put in operation, and so on, but of what my life and my lived reality looks like these days. Thus, unlike what the sophisticated philosopher might expect, we cannot set temporal limits to moral experience that we can specify independently of the terms in which the experience is had. While the experience naïvely described might last for a certain well-specified period of one's life—say beginning with the diagnosis of the disease of the loved one and end with their passing—the temporal limits within which it is enclosed are limits that may be described only in terms of the particular experience that it is. They are times when and not times at which an independently specifiable thing happens.

In this spirit, accounts that favor the naïve representation of experience will take *moral* experience to be a *manifold* of processes, relationships, institutions, people, questions, states, etc.. And their task will be to explore characteristic such manifolds with a view toward shedding light on aspects of (the question of) morality. So the answer to the question at the end of the previous section (what remains worthy to be called *moral experience* if each and every single one of our experiences might count as moral) is that it is precisely the aim of the exploration of significant human experiences to answer this question. This way of looking at things has an unexpected, perhaps, consequence: If moral experience is no longer understood as the distinct activity that grounds cognitive acts that employ moral concepts, then moral experience will no longer need to be conceived of as the activation of or penetration by sophisticated, higher-order, dedicated moral concepts. However, if there is no need to conceive of moral experience as the activation of sophisticated, dedicated, moral, concepts, then one need not be an expert conceptualizer in order to count as having a refined and deep moral experience. All one needs to be is capable of taking up *any* bit of reality as one's life/as what one's life comes to over a period of time. All one needs to be is capable of grasping any bits of reality as lived reality. *This grasping, this taking of what confronts one (doctors, hospitals, feelings, existential questions, and so on) as one's life over a period of time or as lived reality is, I finally want to suggest, a matter of being able to contemplate one's life; take it as a whole; see it; contemplate it, theorein, at once; actively bring it before one's eyes; consider it; and take it in this or that way. This has been my life, I might say. My mom is never going to get better. I would, thus, be talking to you of my experience in the truest and deepest sense, in a sense in which almost all of us, refined conceptualizers or not, could do so. Of course, this does not mean that the ability to contemplate one's life is not something one could do well or badly. It does not mean that one's consciousness could not deepen and mature or the opposite. It means that the issue of what counts as this deepening and maturing could not be settled by expert knowledge of a special domain of knowables.*

I said above that the naïve philosopher, the philosopher who does not deflect from the naïve representation of experience, will be ready to ask what some characteristic human experiences of the above sort reveal to us about morality and its questions. Looking at a photograph of now dead friends in Cora Diamond's essay on the Difficulty of Reality; losing a way of life and with the possibility for happenings in Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope*; caring for the sick and mentally ill in Raimond Gaita's book *A Common Humanity*; never treating anyone, however miserable and wretched their life, as being for nothing in Elizabeth Anscombe's religious writings; having an epiphany in Sophie-Grace Chappell's book on epiphanies; confronting one's daughter in law in Murdoch's famous M&D example, and so on and so forth. Here, in bringing before our eyes in the reflective mode all these experiences, these thinkers invite us to see what the experiences reveal to us about the moral standpoint and its questions.

However, how about learning from experience, you will ask. How about the locutions with which I began this paper? "I know this from experience". How ought we to think of it, if we follow the naïve philosophers? On the sophisticated view I started this paper with, "I know this from experience", in the moral case, was construed on the basis of claiming to know something about objective reality by being sensibly affected by it. However, if moral experience is not to be construed on the model of sense perception, at least not exclusively,

then what could knowing from experience amount to? If moral experience in a given case is the reality in which one is situated under the guise of the terminal illness of a loved one, what might it *be* for one to *know from this experience*? On the naïve understanding of the grammar of moral experience, both *what* the experiences shows one and what it shows itself *in* is different. The experience of the terminal illness of a parent shows one not that an object is there in the world, nor that the world has this or that feature, nor even that one has this or that reason to do things. The kinds of things that the experience of the terminal illness of a parent show one is that, however complicated the relationship, one never really stops loving a parent with the ferocity and surrender of a five-year-old child; that it is certain now that one's own life too will one day come to an end; that our human species life meets our varied human dreams, conceptions, and bonds with a dark, thoughtless cruelty; that each time we are all still here. However, if this is *what* moral experience can show, then what it shows itself *in* cannot be limited to beliefs and actions manifesting propositional claims to knowledge; it has to extend all the way out to such things as the way one looks at another when one talks about these experiences, the tone of voice as one speaks, the effort not to care about things that do not matter, a sense of being happy that each time we are all still here.

Given all this, I want to suggest now that accounts that favor the naïve representation of experience can be seen as embracing a contemplative view.<sup>1</sup> On the episodic view, moral experience is a discreet activity grounding knowledge of a special domain of knowables—knowledge of the moral part or aspect of the world. On the contemplative view, what one knows in moral experiences is not a part of the world but any knowable in the world. Only the difference lies in the manner of knowing: in moral experience, on the contemplative view, one knows *any* knowable as *one's* world, as *one's* reality and *one's* life. And this, this taking up of any knowable as my world and my reality is, I propose, a distinctive way of holding the world in view, or else of *contemplating* the world. Therefore, I call accounts that make room for experience thus-conceived *contemplative*.

## 5. Moral Growth

Now, the question that arises for a contemplative account of *moral* experience is the question of the moral character of this taking up the world as one's world. Different contemplative accounts give different answers to this question by focusing on different experiences and then showing what they reveal to us about morality's standpoint and questions, which goes missing or unappreciated in other discussions. In this vein, for instance, Raimond Gaita starts with three "experiences" that he also calls encounters and about which he says, "These encounters are dramatic but reveal something universal—for someone who is claimed by them" (Gaita 2004, [15] xv) and a bit further on, "I want to show how the world appears to moral reflection about what to do and how to be when it is illuminated by the kind of goodness shown by people such as Charles, the nun and Mother Teresa." ([15] xviii). In what follows, I will suggest that, in at least some experiences that reveal at least part of the moral standpoint, one takes the world as one's world in taking it to be at stake. In fact, I believe, even though I cannot argue for this here, that seeds of this account are implicit in some other contemplative accounts of moral experience. To illustrate this experience, I will use a familiar example, but interpret it differently, more imaginatively, than has usually been interpreted.

In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch gives her famous example of a mother (M) who struggles with her conception of her daughter-in-law (D). Murdoch (1970) [16] describes M's moral activity in the following way: at first, although M characterizes D as being good-hearted and "not exactly common" M also finds her to be "certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement" (p. 16). Later on, though, as a result of *looking*, M comes to *rightly* (by definition of the case) find D "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on" [16] (p. 17). The case that Murdoch asks us to consider here is not one of *changed*, but *changing* outlook.



In this spirit, let us consider this changing for a moment: here, we have a mother-in-law M who, *at first*, struggles with her perception of D—the woman who steals her son from her, *perhaps*—but who *then* starts to see D justly and lovingly. In certain places, Murdoch suggests that the switch from the former to the latter stage in M's experience is due to a move as simple as M saying to herself: "Oh let me be more relaxed about this, let me take another look" [16] (p. 17). One may get the impression that this is merely the case of the substitution of one conception for another. In this frame of mind, one may think of M as the kind of person whose world contains at once the concepts of "unpolished", "lacking in dignity and refinement", etc., on the one hand, and those of "refreshingly simple", "spontaneous", "gay", etc., on the other [16] (p. 17). One may think that what Murdoch describes here is the switching on and off of different concepts that M is in possession of.

However, everywhere in the SG, Murdoch urges us to read M's experience as one of *change* and *progress*, which she says morality is essentially connected to (29). However, what might this change and progress, what I call *growth*, consist of? It is fairly reasonable to think that, in M's judgment of D as unpolished, vulgar, undignified, noisy, and tiresomely juvenile, M operates with concepts of an upper-class snob. In M's own words: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous" [16] (p. 17). Even though Murdoch herself does not elaborate here, we may imagine M as someone whose view of the world is mediated by a false consciousness of class divides. We may imagine M feeling that D's entrance into her son's life threatens the false sense of security and superiority that M's social status allows. We may further imagine that M's need for this false sense of security and superiority speaks to her own inability to face her jealousy. More plausibly, it could mark her inability to develop and foster healthy, unmediated relationships with others in a way that would free her from the emotional dependency of her son's affections. Moreover, we may relate back this dependency to the false sense of security and superiority that M's social status provides. Even in Murdoch's toned-down description of M's experience, we can recognize that M's world has come unhinged. By calling herself "prejudiced and narrow-minded", M is not describing a conception that she routinely has of herself (unless, of course, the words lack meaning or she is a masochist). This description is, I think, best read as marking at once M's acknowledgment of the world as her world (the world of class) and the acknowledgement of her world as having received a blow (it is at once recognized as the world of class and the world of snobbery).

This acknowledgement is, I want to suggest, M's distinctive, moral, way of holding the world in view in experience. However, before we call this an experience in the naïve sense intended in this paper, we need to imagine more. We can imagine, perhaps, M repeatedly registering this disruption on her encounters with other individuals she might have been tempted to un-reflectively call "unpolished" before. We may imagine her reluctance to use concepts in the neighborhood of "unpolished", concepts such as "tiresome" perhaps. We may even imagine her finding that concepts such as "simple", "youthful", and "spontaneous" are awkward replacements for the ones she previously held. We may picture M being unsure of herself for a while or even for the remainder of her life. We may picture her not quite knowing how to exist in the world. Finally, we may imagine M progressively registering this experience of disruption to a point where she can perhaps one day speak of "her experience of meeting or getting to know D" and, in speaking thusly of "her experience", we, the naïve philosophers, can see her taking what was going on in the world (D's behavior, but also her own many thoughts, actions, etc., in this case) as *her* world. I want to suggest now that we, the naïve philosophers, can register something further: we can see that her description of meeting or getting to know D as "an experience" is the acknowledgement of a series of disruptions, of a series of thinkings and doings in which her capacities faltered and fell through. On this reading, M's experience of meeting or getting to know D might consist of the acknowledgement of a blow, where this acknowledgement was the very contemplation of the world as her world.

I have come to believe, together with Murdoch, that this kind of experience reveals something essential about morality's standpoint and questions. However, soon enough, philosophers will object that these are experiences of profound personal change and, so, they are *sui generis* and, so, cannot serve as a starting point for an account of the question of morality in general. After all, we all know (Do we not?) that the typical moral experiences are those of seeing that we ought to pay our debts, speak the truth, be kind to others, and so forth. Surely, the objector will continue: a person does not register anything as disrupted in *seeing* that they ought to pay their debts, speak the truth, or be kind to others. However, in light of my account of M's experience above, we might reconceive these familiar experiences as moral not *because* of what may thereby be disrupted, for by definition, nothing is, but *because* of what may be *upheld*. In a Kantian spirit, then, we could make the following observation: we do not take all debt-paying to be moral, but only the debt-paying that upholds a world in which making promises—and not, say, ensuring personal comfort—holds a central place. Similarly, we do not equate all instances of being nice with kindness, but only those that uphold a world in which attending to the reality of the other independently of oneself holds a central place. On the emerging alternative view, the experiences that reveal at least something of morality's standpoint and questions are the experiences in which one is in view of the world, one's world, as what is at stake, that is as what may either be disrupted or upheld.

The proponent of the refined episodic view may respond that we may find all these limiting considerations *within* one's given outlook. They may claim that we ought to understand the practical thinking in such cases as the actualization under the circumstances of an acquired ability to think thoughts such as "it is more important to pay one's debts than to live comfortably" or "it is more important to keep the other rather than oneself at the center of attention". However, my point here is the limited one that the availability of such thoughts—the availability of a view of the whole—need not be explained in terms of the actualization of an acquired ability. Focusing on the case of disruption makes room for an alternative: in the familiar cases as well, the experiences may be moral because, in them, one is in view of the whole as what is *upheld* and, so, a fortiori, as what is at stake. In the emerging alternative view, what is distinctive of at least some moral experiences is that, in them, one is in view of the whole not as what is applied or actualized, but as what is at stake, that is as what may either be disrupted or upheld.

Now, each such experience of being in view of the whole as what is at stake may take an altogether different guise, depending on their object each time:

- (a) If it is an experience of profound moral growth or change, it may take the form of what Iris Murdoch (1970) calls *attention to the particular*.
- (b) If it is the experience of the call of duty, it may take the form of Kant's categorical imperative, as I explained it above.
- (c) If it is the experience of what is fine, it may take the form of what Talbot Brewer (2009) [17] calls *dialectical activity*: the activity one pursues in light of a deepening understanding of what is fine, which one acquires in the unfolding of this very activity.
- (d) If it is the experience of the other in romantic love, it may take the form of inhabiting or questioning the world of another. Pippin (2020) [18], for instance, argues in his analysis of Nicholas Ray's film *In a Lonely Place* that the question of intimacy is precisely the question of how to relate to the world of another.
- (e) If it is the experience of loss in death, it may take the form of the poetic encounter with the world of the other. Cora Diamond (2020) [12], for instance, meditates on Beckett's description of Proust's awareness of his grandmother's loss in *In Search for Lost Time* and, in particular, on the experience of how poetic and fictional language can restore us to a whole world that is lost with the loss of a loved one.
- (f) Finally, if it is the experience of loss of control over one's own life, it may take the form of the acceptance of suffering in human life. Megan Laverty (2014) [19] explores how, in Thomas Hardy's short story "A Mere Interlude", the experience of the collapse of

control over the heroine's own life comes with the acceptance of the randomness and blindness of suffering in human life.

In each of the above experiences, one is in view of the whole as what is at stake. However, this takes on a different guise in each case. In (a), one's view of the world may fall apart under the weight of paying loving attention to the reality of an individual; in (b), one's ability to conceive of a world (a world in which one's maxims would serve as universal laws) might come undone in the consideration of an immoral act; in (c), one's understanding of what is fine may be challenged through realizing what acting in the light of this understanding actually involves; in (d), one's encounter with the other as a world unto itself may be annihilated in the very act of turning one's objectifying gaze onto the other; in (e), one's ability to be restored to the world of those now gone may itself go dead as we fail to tune in to the poetic and fictional aspect of language; in (f), one's view of one's whole life as one's own may come undone in the acceptance of the blindness of suffering in human life.

In each of these experiences, one's being in view of the whole takes on a different guise. However, in each of these experiences, one is in view of the whole as what is at stake, and so, in light of the proposal of this paper, one's experience counts as moral. Thus, we may see that the experience of profound personal change and growth is not as *sui generis* as one may be at first inclined to think. In fact, one could argue that it is precisely a merit of this this view of moral experience that it does one restrict the notion of experience in the way that the empiricist, episodic view does.

## 6. The Moral Standpoint

However, what about morality's standpoint and questions do these experiences reveal? I suggested above that M's experience of D is the contemplation of the world as her world in the very undoing of her world and that, in M's experience of D, D comes into view as the individual that she is precisely through this disruption. Regarding my envisioned case, as M moves from judging D as lacking in class to experiencing her as youthful, M is *not* moving from a negation to an affirmation, that is from states of affairs that do not agree with the thought to states of affairs that do. On the contrary, M is moving from experiencing D in terms of all the hitherto available possibilities for thinking and being (one is found to be either polished or not; one finds others to be either polished or not) to gradually suffering the collapse of these possibilities for thinking and being in the encounter with the reality of D. Ultimately, we might say that M experiences D precisely in experiencing a faltering in her ability to pass judgment. To be faced with D's reality is for the M of false class divides to no longer be able to judge D and, in this, to no longer be the M who judges D.

However, as I also contended above, it is not the world's collapse in particular that marks M's experience of D as special. Rather, what marks this experience as special is that M's world is now before M's eyes and it is before her eyes as what may be disrupted or upheld. Now, this possibility for contemplation, this contemplative account of moral experience gives rise to a renewed view of the question of morality: what morality asks of us: If in some moral experiences, one's world is before one's eyes as what may be disrupted or upheld, then it could be the case that, to a certain extent, at least, one may either uphold one's world or let it collapse on one. If I am right, and if in some experiences we may be in view of our own possibilities for thinking and being as being at stake, then the following condition of human life takes flesh. First of all, in living a life of commitment to others as we do (a commitment to partners, children, students, colleagues, etc.), we are aware that a time could come when, in some experience, we might come to be in view of all our previous possibilities for thinking and being as being at stake, as faltering and failing. Second, our awareness of ourselves as potentially confronted with the collapse of all possibilities for thinking and being may itself, at times, become false. In other words, it is possible that, when faced with the difficulty of upholding a world of tremendously difficult questions and perhaps even insurmountable difficulties, we may hide in this awareness and let our world—the possibilities for thinking and being—collapse on us, when we should not have.

One great difficulty of this sort involves upholding the possibilities for thinking and being that constitute the scaffolding of justice when things around us get miserably difficult. The labor of justice often seems entirely unrealistic. Nevertheless, we know that it was the people who upheld the possibilities for thinking and justice in the past, even when doing so seemed unrealistic, who remained closest to reality as we know it today. Thus, there arise before us two recognizably moral questions: (1) the practical moral question of how to take up a life of commitment to others in the face of our awareness of ourselves (our possibilities for thinking and being) and others (their possibilities for thinking and being) as being at stake in some of our experiences and (2) the epistemological moral question of whether doing our best to uphold a world that appears to be at stake in an experience is on each occasion a matter of being a visionary or simply a matter of being enamored with our own vision.

To conclude, in the first part of this essay, I characterized a view that I called episodic. I ended this paper with an account of a different sort. I called this sort contemplative, in part to draw attention to the way in which contemplation (*theorein*) figures in living the kind of life we are distinctly capable of (*praxis*). I want to end this paper with a suggestion and a question. On the proposed account, in some moral experiences, we are in view of the world in being in view of our world as what is at stake. I suggest now that we may say that, in some moral experiences, we are in view of *ourselves* as being in view of the world. With this suggestion, we may encounter *ourselves* in some experiences as a form of the world. However, if one mark of the moral character of some of our experiences is that, in them, we encounter ourselves as a form of the world, then the question of moral knowledge can no longer be the question of how the episodic activation of a capacity or mechanism grounds moral knowledge claims. It can no longer be the question of the way we *apply* or *enact* our moral concepts in sensible receptivity, as the episodic accounts suppose. The question of moral knowledge must be instead the question of how *we*—that is, a form of the world—change. In the case of growth and change that I described in this paper, *something can happen* that does not fit, that seems jarring, that seems beyond what we would expect, and then, *we* may be changed, rather than “we may adjust it”. It is in thus *being* changed, I contend, that the ability to learn from moral experience crucially lies. Thus, “I know from experience” in the moral case comes down to saying, “Such and such experience(s) have (has) changed me, that’s how I know.”

Let me end this paper with a final question: How about the pervasive intuition in the literature that sense perception is a useful model for the understanding of moral experience: should we altogether refuse this intuition? The answer is no. There is room for the analogy of sense perception in the picture I am trying to draw in this paper. This is the room that can be found in saying that, *often times, the moral task is easy; all you have to do is open your eyes to see: the kids torturing the cat is no play; it is cruelty*. On the view I have tried to sketch in this paper, moral experiences are experiences that reveal something essential about the questions of morality. At the same time, these are experiences that sharpen, deepen, and mature (or the opposite) our sense of ourselves and the other, and in so doing transform us and change our perspective, so that, *when we open our eyes to see, the world looks different*. This, I maintain, is the right place for the model of sense perception in our understanding of moral experience. But this is a limited place.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** For comments on earlier drafts of this paper I would like to thank audiences from the workshop on Moral Perception at the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover, the workshop on Moral Impossibility at the Centre for Ethics at the University of Pardubice, the conference on Truth in Evaluation at the University of Sassari and the Philosophy Department of the University of Durham. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The term *contemplation* may bring to mind the exalted form of awareness involved in the Aristotelian *theorein*, which is what the divine being does in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. However, this is not the only appearance of the term in the Aristotelian corpus. A number of philosophers have recently argued that we should expand our understanding of *theoria* to accommodate the role that the concept plays in Aristotle's account of practical thinking (see, for instance, Roochnik [13] and Richardson-Lear [14]). In this spirit, I keep the common translation of the term—*contemplation*—to characterize the view I plan to bring to light in the second part of the paper.

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