

Prolegomena to a future phenomenology of morals

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Abstract Moral phenomenology is (roughly) the study of those features of occurrent mental states with moral significance which are accessible through direct introspection, whether or not such states possess phenomenal character – a what-it-is-likeness. In this paper, as the title indicates, we introduce and make prefatory remarks about moral phenomenology and its significance for ethics. After providing a brief taxonomy of types of moral experience, we proceed to consider questions about the *commonality within* and *distinctiveness of* such experiences, with an eye on some of the main philosophical issues in ethics and how moral phenomenology might be brought to bear on them. In discussing such matters, we consider some of the doubts about moral phenomenology and its value to ethics that are brought up by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Michael Gill in their contributions to this issue.

Keywords Moral experience · Moral judgment · Moral objectivity · Moral phenomenology

In the period since G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, moral philosophers in the analytic tradition typically have not been concerned with moral phenomenology as central to ethical theorizing. This is true despite the fact that one frequently finds, in normative moral theory and metaethics, appeals to the phenomenology of moral experience. Still, one does not find many papers or books dedicated to the topic.¹ We think this should change: that in doing ethical theory, one ought to pay careful attention to the details of moral phenomenology as a partial basis for addressing questions about ethics. Our main purpose here, as our title indicates, is to introduce

¹ One notable exception is Maurice Mandelbaum's 1955, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*.

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and make prefatory remarks about moral phenomenology and its significance for ethics; it is not to provide answers to the questions we raise. That is a task for another, much larger project that we are currently pursuing.

Plan

We propose to use the term ‘moral phenomenology’ to refer to the ‘what-it-is-likeness’ of concrete moral experiences. But there is a broad range of types of moral experience. And so we begin with questions about the scope of moral phenomenology – what sorts of experiences are to be included as at least partly constituting its subject matter. To address this question, we begin in the next section with a provisional taxonomy of types of moral experience. We then proceed to consider questions about commonality within, and distinctiveness among, moral experiences – questions that are the focus of Sinnott-Armstrong’s essay in this volume. We take up the general question of whether considerations of moral phenomenology can be of use in helping to adjudicate issues in philosophical ethics. Here, we are inclined to resist the skeptical conclusion found in Michael Gill’s contribution to this volume, namely, that considerations of moral phenomenology lie too far “downstream” of certain ethically loaded background assumptions to be of much use in ethics. In the final section we briefly consider some main issues in ethics whose treatment may benefit from a close examination of moral phenomenology.

Scope and method

Unfortunately, the term ‘moral phenomenology’, at least as used by philosophers, is accordion-like in its usage.² Sometimes it is used *very* broadly to refer to any and all of what are considered to be deeply embedded features of moral thought and discourse, including (1) its grammar and logic, (2) people’s “critical practices” regarding such thought and discourse (including, for example, the assumption that genuine moral disagreements are possible), and (3) the what-it-is-likeness of various moral experiences, including, but not restricted to, concrete experiences of occurrently morally judging some action, person, institution, or other item of moral evaluation. For purposes of clarity (and with an important qualification that we will proceed to explain), we propose to restrict the term in question to the third category of deeply embedded features – to phenomena constitutive of concrete occurrent moral experiences.

In recent philosophy of mind, the term ‘phenomenology’ is sometimes used to refer to subject matter – the types of mental state that are the study of phenomenology. The term is also used to refer to a method of first-person introspective accessibility through which (presumably) one has a distinctive form

² See Kriegel (2007) for a helpful discussion of issues of scope and method in phenomenology.

of epistemic access to one's occurrent mental states. So, the term 'phenomenology' is typically used to refer to those occurrent mental states (or aspects of them) that are directly accessible to introspection. However, within contemporary philosophy of mind, there is a lively dispute over whether all such consciously accessible occurrent mental states and mental features have what is often called "phenomenal character" – a what-it-is-likeness. Some parties to this dispute – the "exclusivists" – use the term 'phenomenology' to refer to those states with phenomenal character *and* they think that only sensory mental states – states in which something looks, tastes, feels, sounds, or smells a certain way – have phenomenal character. Other philosophers, the "inclusivists", hold that various non-sensory occurrent states also have proprietary phenomenal character. On this view, the phenomenal includes such cognitive states as occurrent beliefs. Moreover, according to these inclusivists, not only do such psychological *attitudes* have a what-it-is-likeness to them, but there is also something it is like to entertain *contents* – that, for instance, what it is like to entertain the content *Chicago is the capital of Illinois* is different from what it is like to entertain the content *Chicago is not the capital of Illinois*.

Note two things. First, even on the exclusivist construal of the phenomenal, it is extremely misleading to use the term "feels" for what phenomenology (restricted to the phenomenal) purports to study. There is no way that having the experience as of looking at a red tomato *feels*; rather, it is the *look* that is distinctive of this kind of visual-based sensory experience. "Feel" talk, literally construed, is properly restricted to the sense modality of touch and such somatic states as tickles, itches, and pains.³ And clearly, if one includes cognitive states within the realm of the phenomenal, then "feel" talk is even more strained. We make a point of this because it will be important when we later consider Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of moral phenomenology (see "[Commonality and distinctiveness](#)").

Notice (second) that common to both exclusivist and inclusivist camps is the methodological claim that introspection provides an agent with a special kind of direct access to such states she undergoes. This common element, we think, ought to be the characteristic that properly fixes the study of phenomenology generally and moral phenomenology in particular. Let us explain.

We ourselves have inclusivist proclivities, but we don't need to take a stand on the exclusivist vs. inclusivist debate here. Rather, our proposal is to use the term 'phenomenology' so that its scope includes all of those occurrent mental states that are (or that have features that are) introspectively accessible. (Remember: one can hold that the scope of phenomenology – as a study – includes mental states and features that are introspectively accessible, even if some of these lack phenomenal character.) The import of this usage for moral phenomenology is this. As we shall explain in the next section, one broad range of moral experiences consists of what we call "judgment-involving" moral experiences – they involve, as a constitutive part, moral judgments. Such judgments, even if they lack phenomenal character (qua judgments), do have features that are introspectively accessible. And so, according to

³ "Feel" talk is often used in connection with emotions too, although perhaps such talk is quasi-metaphorical. And there is also the yet more extended, yet more quasi-metaphorical, use of 'feel' with "that" – clauses, as in "I feel that George Bush is performing badly".

our usage, such judgments are part of the study of moral phenomenology, which we characterize this way:

Moral phenomenology: the study of those features of occurrent mental states with moral significance which are accessible through direct introspection, whether or not such states possess phenomenal character.⁴

Talk of “moral significance” is intentionally vague, since we don’t know how to define moral mental experiences and thus set them apart from non-moral ones. Rather, we proceed by example. To indicate and organize the kinds of experiences we have in mind, we distinguish five dimensions along which such experiences can be usefully sorted.

1. *Judgment-involving and non-judgment-involving.* Many moral experiences involve, as a component, coming to have or form a moral judgment. For instance, after mulling it over for a while, one comes to believe that the USA ought not to have invaded Iraq. Part of one’s overall experience here is the coming to have or make a moral judgment.

Some moral phenomenologists claim that an important variety of moral experience does not involve having or making moral judgments. According to Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1990), there are cases of what they call ‘ethical comportment’ in which a morally skilled individual spontaneously performs some morally appropriate action in some circumstance without making or having a moral judgment. Spontaneously reaching out a helping hand to someone about to slip and fall is perhaps an example. We don’t take a stand on whether such cases are properly described as not involving moral judgment.

2. *First-order and second-order.* Certainly experiences of guilt, shame, indignation, and moral anger are important in the study of moral phenomenology. But these moral emotions are typically second-order moral experiences, since they are directed toward actions and other items of moral evaluation that are judged to be morally wrong or bad. One judges, for instance, that Tracy has benefited from her moral wrong-doing, which arouses in one the moral emotion of indignation. What we are calling first-order moral judgments, then, are those more basic judgments of obligation and value that may prompt some particular moral emotion of the sort just mentioned.
3. *Judgments of obligation and judgments of value:* It is common to distinguish judgments of moral obligation from judgments of moral value. One might suppose that the phenomenologies involving judgments of one type are much the same as the phenomenologies involving judgments of the other type. But Maurice Mandelbaum, in his 1955 treatise on moral phenomenology, made a further distinction that challenges this supposition.

⁴ Siewert (2007) uses the term ‘phenomenology’ primarily to refer to the method of introspection, thus leaving open the proper subject matter of phenomenology. Also, we note the following. It may well be that certain aspects of one’s mental life, despite being directly present in experience, are not *introspectively manifest*. For instance, we ourselves argue in Horgan and Timmons (2008) that it is not introspectively manifest whether or not consciously accessible experiences of moral obligation carry ontologically objective purport.

4. *Direct moral experiences and removed moral experiences.* According to Mandelbaum, there is an important phenomenological difference between what he called ‘direct’ and ‘removed’ moral experience. Direct moral experiences are those in which one is presently confronted with a set of circumstances which one experiences as ‘calling for’ one to either act or refrain from acting in a particular way on that occasion, and in response to which one comes to have or make a moral judgment about what one ought or ought not do. By contrast, removed moral experiences include those which involve the making or the having of an ought-judgment about one’s past self or about someone else, as well as experiences which include judgments either about the moral goodness or badness of specific character traits or about the overall character of self and others. Mandelbaum claims that one phenomenological difference between such types of experience is the fact that a direct moral experience:

evokes emotion [which], like fear or anger, is experienced as a state of the self and is directly related to action. [By contrast] the stirredupness and pressures which are present in direct moral judgments have no counterpart in removed moral judgments. (Mandelbaum 1955: 127)

We will have more to say about Mandelbaum’s direct/removed distinction below.

5. *Intuitive moral judgments and deliberative moral judgments:* Intuitive judgments are psychologically spontaneous in that they occur “without a conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (Haidt 2001: 818). Gilbert Harman describes the case where you round a corner and see a group of hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and set it on fire. As Harman says, “you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong” (1977: 4). By contrast, deliberative moral judgments result from such activities as consciously searching, weighing evidence, and then reaching a moral conclusion.⁵

Figure 1 is a visual aid that summarizes the various dimensions of moral experience that we have been making. Again, our taxonomy is meant to be provisional; its purpose here is to indicate the range of concrete moral experiences that form at least a large part of the subject matter of moral phenomenology.

One immediate lesson to be drawn here is that one should not *assume* that the phenomenology of one sort of experience will exhibit the same features (either entirely or in part) as all of the others. Nor should one *assume* upon casual introspection that there is no interesting commonality across moral experiences. Similar remarks apply to the question of whether there are any aspects of moral phenomenology that are distinctive of such experiences qua moral. Space does not

⁵ Cases involving intuitive moral judgments are to be contrasted with the putative cases of ‘ethical comportment’ that the Dreyfus brothers discuss in their 1990 paper, in which one allegedly responds spontaneously as a matter of reflex – experiences that they claim do not involve having or making a moral judgment (not even a *spontaneous* judgment that generates spontaneous, unhesitating, behavior). We ourselves are dubious about their claim that the cases they have in mind do not involve as a constituent a moral judgment.

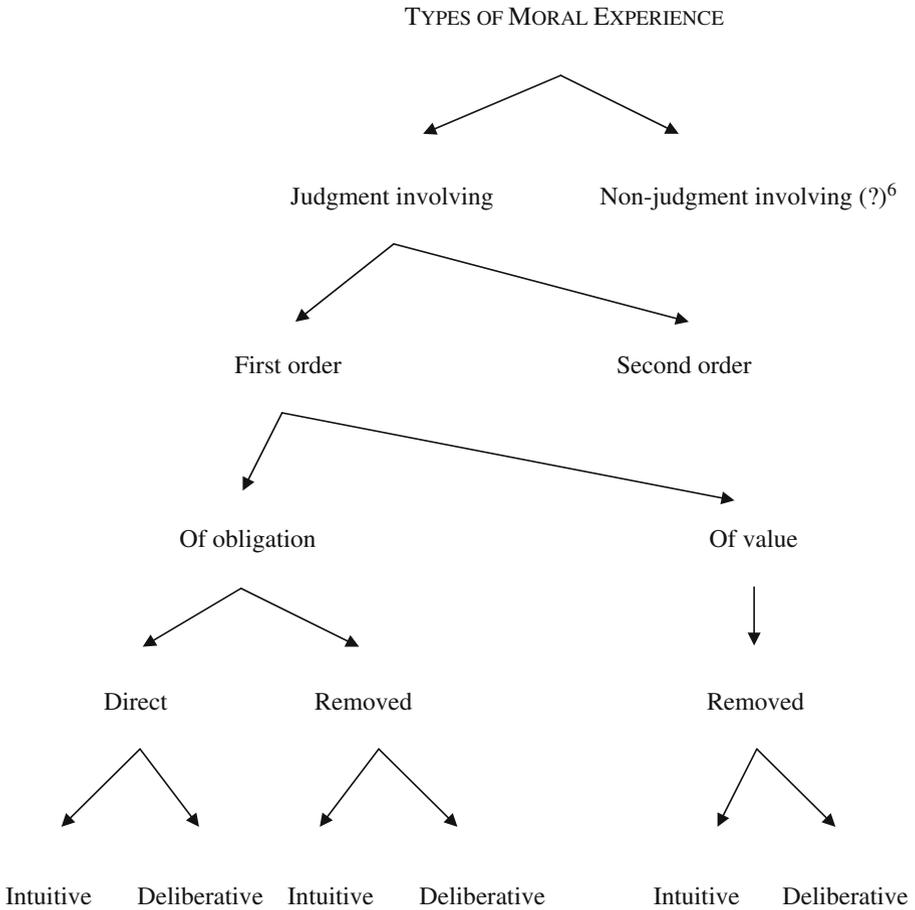


Fig. 1 Types of moral experience. The *question mark* here reflects the point about ‘ethical comportment’ that we explained in footnote 5. So we officially leave open the question of whether one ought to recognize this (alleged) category of moral experience

permit a thorough investigation of these questions in relation to the entire range of types of moral experiences. So our plan is to dwell primarily on judgment-involving moral experiences, particularly those involving direct judgments of obligation, in order to make some progress about questions of commonality and distinctiveness. So with this focus in mind, let us proceed to consider these questions.

Commonality and distinctiveness

In addition to questions about the scope of moral phenomenology, one can ask whether there is some underlying unifying feature (or set of them) that is (1) common to all (or nearly all) moral experiences and that would (2) serve to distinguish *moral* experiences from non-moral experiences. The questions are, of course, distinct. Even if all moral

experiences share some common feature(s), the feature(s) in question might not be distinctive of moral experiences qua moral. These questions about commonality and distinctiveness are what occupy Sinnott-Armstrong in his contribution to this volume, and so in exploring these questions, we will make contact with what he says about them. Let us begin with commonality.

Are there any features common to moral experience?

As we explained in Hogan and Timmons (2005), one can be thinking either globally or more locally about this question. It may be that a certain species of moral experience exhibits some common underlying features, even if such features are not shared by other types of moral experience. So, one needs to distinguish local from global commonality. In exploring the question of whether there are common features shared globally, one might begin locally, examining various species of moral experience, and then compare species to see whether there are any common features that are shared globally. This is how Mandelbaum proceeds, whose view on the matter we will consider presently. But before we do, there are a few other observations worth making about this question of commonality.

Presumably, in examining whatever unity there might be in moral experience, one is looking for common elements that are *constitutive* of those experiences. But one wants something more than any old constitutive common elements. After all, it is easy to find some scheme for classifying such experiences that connects them: they all share the intrinsic property of being conscious. But this is not very interesting. What is wanted is some interesting kind of commonality, if it exists.

Begin by considering the kind of commonality that is often sought in standard normative moral theory – commonality at the level of those nonnormative, underlying, “natural” features possessed by items of moral evaluation (and the circumstances in which they are present). And let us first consider moral experiences involving judgments of obligation. Monist moral theories propose that there is some single underlying feature in virtue of which actions (including omissions) are obligatory; pluralist theories propose a small set of such underlying features.⁶ And it would seem that when it comes to the phenomenology of moral experience in concrete cases (involving deontic judgments), such experiences do not (at least for most people) comport with monism – rather, moral experiences of being obligated, for instance, seem to be evoked by a variety of factors that vary from one circumstance to another. The factors involved in experiencing an obligation of gratitude, for example, differ from the factors involved in coming upon someone who is in need of help. Indeed, a virtue of the sort of ethical pluralism we find in the writings of W. D. Ross (1930, 1939) is that this view is faithful to much concrete moral experience. Nevertheless, one might ask whether at some level more unity can be found than a Rossian view delivers.

Mandelbaum thought so. Recall that Mandelbaum distinguishes between direct and removed moral experiences. A direct moral experience is one in which an agent

⁶ For simplicity, we set aside particularist views (that embrace reasons holism), which are opposed to both monism and pluralism as here understood. But see our brief discussion of atomism versus holism about moral reasons in the section of this article headed “Issues”.

experiences a felt demand to perform or refrain from some action given the circumstances in which she is placed. For example, in driving along a little-traveled roadway, one comes upon a person who is lying on the side of the road, alone, bleeding, and in obvious pain. From the driver's perspective, she experiences a "felt demand" (coming from the circumstances) to stop and help. But, according to Mandelbaum, there is more to this species of moral phenomenology than this sort of felt demand:

In this type of case...it becomes clear that the element of moral demand presupposes an apprehension of fittingness: the envisioned action places a demand upon us only because it is seen as connected with and fittingly related to the situation which we find ourselves confronting (Mandelbaum 1955: 67–8).

So, for Mandelbaum, the apprehension of an action's fitting (or not fitting) the present circumstance is the phenomenological ground of one's felt demand. Phenomenologically, the apprehension of fittingness (or unfittingness) is basic here. And notice that the notion of fittingness is ineliminably normative, and so can't be reduced to nonnormative notions. So even if, at the level of nonmoral features that underlie moral obligation, one does not find some common, unifying feature that presents itself to us in experiences of direct moral obligation, one does find (at least if one follows Mandelbaum) that such experiences have common *normative* elements: a felt demand and an apprehension of fittingness, the latter the phenomenological ground of the former.

However, although removed moral experiences involving judgments of obligation (as when I pass judgment on someone else's actions) are not characterized by a felt demand, they are nevertheless experienced as grounded in an apprehension of fittingness. The same point holds for moral experiences involving judgments of value (judgments about the goodness or badness of some character trait or someone's overall character). According to Mandelbaum, "The traditionally recognized virtues are...precisely those character traits which provide fitting answers to the ever-recurring demands which all men face" (1955: 150). Reflecting on judgment-involving moral experiences of obligation and of value, Mandelbaum concludes:

Thus, if the preceding analyses have been correct, we have not only found reason to believe that all moral judgments do constitute a single genus, but we have also found the characteristic which defines that genus. This characteristic is that all moral judgments are grounded in our apprehension of relations of fittingness or unfittingness between the responses of a human being and the demands which inhere in the situation by which he is faced. (Mandelbaum 1955: 181)

Here, then, are two questions that Mandelbaum's phenomenological analysis raises:

- Is Mandelbaum right in his claim that an apprehension of fittingness is common to judgment-involving moral experiences?

- If he is, is this common element interesting for purposes of ethical inquiry?

We are inclined to give affirmative answers to these questions. But before considering the matter further, let us turn to the issue of distinctiveness.

Are there any features that are distinctive of moral experience?

Even if one common underlying feature of moral experience is that of something's being fittingly or unfittingly related to some situation or circumstance, it is somewhat controversial whether this feature alone is distinctive of such experience. Apparently both C. D. Broad (1930: 165) and W. D. Ross (1939: 53–5) thought it was – that there is something distinctive about the experience of *moral* fittingness. But, Mandelbaum, we think, sets the record straight on this matter. Mandelbaum points out that experiences of fittingness and unfittingness are a ubiquitous feature of our lives. One of his examples of non-moral fittingness is a case in which one has a particular desire (say to move a very heavy rock) but, initially at least, one sees no means by which one might make it budge. If one discovers a pole that might be used as a lever, using the pole that way will strike one as a fitting act – fitting in relation to one's desire. On the other hand, if one discovers that no means are available, one may change one's goal, which will appear as a fitting response to one's uncooperative circumstances. Another non-moral example of Mandelbaum's is the experience of certain bodily needs: one is thirsty and thus it seems fitting to drink.⁷ In comparing these experiences of non-moral fittingness with the experience of viewing a contemplated act of some sort as fulfilling a promise, Mandelbaum writes:

[T]he apprehended relation of fittingness which we have found to be basic to the presence of moral demands seems to be identical with the apprehended fittingness in other cases, as is testified by the fact that of our three original examples of fittingness of an action to a situation [i.e., goal/desire; thirst/drinking; action/having promised], only one of them could be said to give rise to a moral demand (Mandelbaum 1955: 71).

And the reason why only the promising case (of the three) can give rise to a *moral* demand is that by contrast to the other two, it involves a sense that the relation of fittingness between the contemplated act of keeping the promise and one's circumstances is experienced as obtaining independently of one's desires and urges, and thus as “objective”. In the other two cases, the fittingness relation is experienced as obtaining between one's desires or urges on the one hand, and some contemplated actions on the other. Hence, according to Mandelbaum, such fittingness relations are experienced as “subjective”.

In characterizing the difference between moral choices involving obligation from non-moral choices, Mandelbaum writes:

This feeling of obligation appears as independent of preference, as many of the alternatives within our experience do not. Where neither alternative has this character, where our choices are wholly matters of preference or desire, the

⁷ These examples are found on pp. 64–5 of his 1955 book.

choice which we face does not appear as a moral choice. However, let either alternative appear not as a preference, but as an ‘objective’ demand, and I feel myself to be confronted by a moral issue, by a categorical imperative, by an injunctive force which issues from one of the alternatives itself (Mandelbaum 1955: 50).

In all three cases mentioned above, one experiences some contemplated action as being demanded of one and hence as being fitting, indeed, as being *most* fitting in relation to one’s circumstances. Phenomenologically, the *relation* here is the same in all cases. But, according to Mandelbaum, in non-moral experiences of fit or unfit, it is the fact that certain of one’s desires or preferences are directed toward the realization of some state of affairs that, together with facts about the fulfillment of these desires or preferences, figure into an explanation of why a particular action is or is not fitting in a certain set of circumstances. By contrast, in cases of moral experience, the action’s fit or unfit does not depend in this way on what one happens to desire or prefer.⁸ For Mandelbaum, then, experiences of certain instances of fittingness (or unfittingness) as objective are (seemingly) distinctive of *moral* judgment-involving experiences.⁹

Here, then, are some questions that Mandelbaum’s account of distinctiveness raises:

- Is Mandelbaum correct in claiming that “independence of preference” is distinctive of moral judgment-involving experiences?
- If not, is there any other feature common to moral experiences that is distinctive of them qua moral?
- If not, is there perhaps a plurality of features that are at least distinctive of *prototypical* moral experiences?
- If so, what are they, and how are they related to experiences of moral obligation and value?

In Horgan and Timmons (2005), we expressed doubts about Mandelbaum’s distinctiveness claim. We pointed to experiences of the demands of etiquette as involving felt demands, grounded in a sense of what would or would not be fitting from the point of view of etiquette. Like moral demands, these demands are often experienced as independent of preference. We also tentatively proposed a plurality of features (some dispositional) of prototypical moral experiences that seemed collectively to set them apart from non-moral experiences involving the fit or unfit of actions and traits.¹⁰ We here leave our proposal as tentative—worthy, we think, of

⁸ The ‘in this way’ is important since, obviously, facts about desires and preferences can be part of the morally relevant features of the circumstances that one confronts.

⁹ Mandelbaum is not entirely clear about what is distinctive of moral experiences. But in one place (1955: 30), he says that what distinguishes moral choices from non-moral choices (both of which involve a felt demand), is that the latter are experienced as independent of preference and thus as objective.

¹⁰ The features we discussed were: (1) *felt independence* (Mandelbaum’s feature), (2) *types of reasons* for moral judgments that seem distinctively moral, (3) *felt importance* of certain considerations, and (4) *reactive attitudes* that people typically display in response to experiences of obligation and value.

further examination. But we do think it is here fitting to comment on Sinnott-Armstrong's remarks about Mandelbaum and, more generally, about the issues of commonality and distinctiveness.

Regarding Mandelbaum's attempt to unify moral experiences (i.e., identify features of such experiences that are both common and distinctive) in terms of fit and unfit, Sinnott-Armstrong raises three main objections. First, the notion of fittingness is too broad in its application to capture anything that is distinctive of morality. Second, the metaphorical notion of fittingness is unclear in what it implies about what is right or wrong in specific cases. For instance, when an act is, or would be, a morally fitting thing to do in some circumstance, is there leeway in the sense that there are other, alternative actions available that would also be morally fitting to do?¹¹ Third, even if one could specify a single relation of fittingness, one's sense of what is fitting appears to be nothing more than one's judgment that some action is appropriate. And "as such, there is no reason to think that any phenomenologically identifiable element of experience accompanies every sense of what is fitting. There is no single way that fitting feels" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2007a).

We are not able in the allotted space to give thorough answers to these objections (except perhaps to the first). But we can say enough to cast some doubt on these worries.

Regarding the first point, we agree with Sinnott-Armstrong that what Mandelbaum calls an apprehension of fittingness is not distinctive of moral experiences. As we remarked already, Mandelbaum himself emphasizes this point. What would be problematic for the Mandelbaumian account would be a denial that this sort of apprehension is *common* to first-order judgment-involving moral experiences.

Sinnott-Armstrong does not challenge this claim, though he may think that this sort of common feature is not particularly interesting. We think it is interesting, if for no other reason than that it reflects the fact that moral judgments about rightness and goodness are grounded in a kind of apprehension that is inherently relational. But in order to bring out what is interesting about experiences of fittingness, one must do some phenomenological work. We think (and have argued)¹² that there is an interesting phenomenology of experiences of fittingness and unfittingness.

Sinnott-Armstrong's second objection really amounts to a challenge to anyone who would appeal to fittingness to clarify the notion sufficiently so that considerations of the fittingness of an action have a clear bearing on questions about right and wrong. The challenge is a fair one. At least one aspect of the question about moral leeway is how the concept of fittingness connects with the concepts of the morally obligatory and the morally optional. One way to approach this particular issue is to begin with the notion of unfittingness and use it as a basis for characterizing a strong and weak sense of fittingness. When an action is (all things considered) unfitting (from the point of view of morality), then that action is morally wrong; it is morally ruled out. Supposing that (in the circumstances in question) not all of one's options are morally ruled out, it follows that the omission

¹¹ So, as we understand this challenge about leeway, it is not concerned with the fact that for any type of action that is morally fitting in some circumstance (e.g., repaying a debt), there is often leeway with respect to the specific manner in which one may discharge the debt – by giving cash, writing a check, etc.

¹² Horgan and Timmons (2008).

of the action in question is fitting in the strong sense and hence morally required. Actions which in some circumstances are not (all things considered) unfitting, while their omissions are also not unfitting, are fitting in the weak sense, and hence morally optional.

This helps somewhat in specifying how considerations of fit and unfit imply deontic judgments. But there is much more to say about the matter. For instance, what about what Kant called duties of wide obligation, where performing some concrete action on some occasion is not, in our sense, strongly fitting, and so not morally required, but whose performance would nevertheless fulfill a duty such as charity? Furthermore, how does talk of actions being fittingly or unfittingly related to a circumstance relate to questions about supererogatory actions? We won't pause here to consider these questions about moral leeway, but we do recognize that they are important and deserve answers.¹³

Finally, there is Sinnott-Armstrong's third objection, the upshot of which is that there is no single way an apprehension of fittingness *feels*. Sinnott-Armstrong seems to equate a mental state's having a phenomenology with its having a "feel".¹⁴ If by 'feel' one has in mind some sensory state or some affective state – perhaps of the sort associated with disgust, or with anger, or with shame, or with guilt – then the point holds, but is not to the point.¹⁵ As we explained in "[Scope and method](#)", we do not think that the subject matter of phenomenology is properly restricted to feels, understood either literally as touch-sensations or quasi-metaphorically as emotional reactions. Recall that according to our understanding of phenomenology generally and moral phenomenology in particular, the subject matter of phenomenology is properly understood as including the entire range of mental states whose features are available to direct introspective awareness. So, the fact that a certain occurrent moral mental state lacks a distinctive "feel" does not mean that it falls outside the purview of moral phenomenology (the same is true even if the occurrent mental state lacks distinctive phenomenal character altogether, although we ourselves would deny that moral experiences are so characterizable). Moreover, we think there is a phenomenology characteristic of the apprehension of fittingness which we have tried to characterize in Horgan and Timmons (2008; we say a bit more about this matter in "[Issues](#)").

Variability

Mandelbaum argued that the only non-question-begging methodology available to those engaged in normative ethical inquiry is what he called a "structural" phenomenological approach – one that abstracts from the contents of moral judgments and takes into account what he referred to as the entire judgmental act. The specific details of his structural approach are not of primary concern here.

¹³ Sinnott-Armstrong also raises questions about obligatory omissions when he notes that "what is fitting morally is often negative: not to cheat, not to lie, not to kill, and so on. When I have a moral obligation not to reveal your secret, is every other act fitting? Does my omission of revealing your secret fit every situation I face?" Again, we do not address these questions here.

¹⁴ This seems to be implied when Sinnott-Armstrong says of demands on action that "to call them demands is not to describe how they feel. It is not to do phenomenology". (2007a).

¹⁵ This is the first horn of the dilemma Sinnott-Armstrong poses for moral phenomenology. See his paper in this volume.

Rather, we are interested in Michael Gill's (2007) challenge to the idea that appeals to moral phenomenology can play the sort of methodological role that Mandelbaum envisioned.

Gill's challenge has to do with the variability of peoples moral experiences. Such experiences, he claims, "may vary in a way that greatly limits the extent to which moral phenomenology can constitute a reason to favor one moral theory over another."¹⁶ Gill clarifies his 'variability' challenge as follows:

I suspect that how people experience morality is often infected by their theoretical beliefs or prior commitments concerning the nature or origin of morality—that moral phenomenology lies downstream of moral theorizing....My main goal [in this article] is to challenge the idea that there exists a moral phenomenology that is as robust and universal as many philosophers have traditionally thought (Gill 2007).

In defending his thesis, Gill discusses apparent phenomenological differences regarding the "normative authority" of moral demands between certain traditional moral rationalists, Clarke and Cudworth, on the one hand and Kierkegaard on the other. Clarke and Cudworth believed that morality is normatively overriding and intelligible to rational human thought. In contrast, Kierkegaard denied the overridingness of moral demands. He held instead that not only do demands of faith override any conflicting demands of morality, but that the basis of these overriding demands of faith need not be intelligible to human beings. Gill also discusses differences between rationalist and sentimentalist approaches to moral judgment that arguably reflect very different moral phenomenologies. Rationalists took mathematical and, in particular, geometrical judgment as a model for moral judgment; sentimentalists took aesthetic judgment as their model.

In both kinds of dispute, as Gill describes them, the disputants report importantly different moral experiences. And Gill hypothesizes that the best explanation of these differences is that the disputants' moral experiences reflect the varied theoretical commitments of these philosophers. On this hypothesis, then, appeals to moral phenomenology cannot serve as a pre-theoretical basis for favoring any of the philosophical positions being debated by these philosophers; the phenomenology is too theory-laden to play this sort of role. The suggestion, then, is that this lesson generalizes to other disputes in ethics. This is Gill's variability challenge to moral phenomenology.

We take this challenge very seriously, and we think a full response would require careful phenomenological investigation of types of moral experience as well as careful consideration of the various ethical disputes that an appeal to moral phenomenology might help resolve. So we will restrict ourselves to a few observations about the challenge and how one might respond to it.

We first need to lay out the assumptions that seem to be implicit in the work of Mandelbaum and others who would hope to get some ethical mileage out of moral phenomenology. There are at least three such assumptions:

Width: There are facts about people's moral experiences that are widely shared.

¹⁶ Gill (2007).

Independence: Such facts are “pre-theoretical” in the sense that their phenomenal character is sufficiently independent of people’s acceptance of various ethical theories.

Robustness: Such facts are robust enough to be of use in providing evidence either for or against at least some ethical theories. In this context, ‘robustness’ has to do with whether some feature (or fact) either favors or disfavors some thesis or theory in ethics. Robustness, note, is something that comes in degrees. Some feature of moral phenomenology may decidedly disfavor one or more competing theses or theories in ethics without being determinate enough to uniquely favor some one competitor.

We understand Gill’s variability challenge as involving a trilemma. Given the variability of people’s theoretical commitments in ethics, there are not any aspects of moral phenomenology that are wide, independent, and robust. In particular, given variability,

- (1) Any feature that is widely shared will not be both independent and robust;
- (2) Any feature that is independent will not be both widely shared and robust; and
- (3) Any feature that is robust will not be both independent and widely shared.

Is Gill right about this?

The claim about width is clearly empirical (at least once one has decided what counts as a *moral* experience). Here is where anthropological and sociological studies are particularly relevant. From what we can tell, there is good evidence of wide cross-cultural commonality in people’s moral experiences, which admits of various possible explanations. One such explanation is the Mikhail/Hauser hypothesis that humans are born with a common moral sense complete with an innate “universal moral grammar” that both constrains the kinds of moral experiences available to humans and accounts for the great deal of observed cross-cultural overlap¹⁷ (Mikhail and Hauser think of this moral grammar as analogous in many ways to Chomsky’s “universal grammar”). This evidence at least strongly suggests that people’s moral experiences (at least at a certain level of description) are widely shared. Add to this anthropological evidence the psychological evidence reported by Turiel (1983) about young children being able to distinguish conventional rules and demands from moral rules and demands, and one has further evidence of widely shared moral experiences beginning at an early age. So, there is reason to be optimistic about there being some widely shared elements of people’s moral phenomenology. But, then, are any of them also independent and robust?

Gill claims that a person’s moral phenomenology will be “infected by” her theoretical beliefs in and about ethics, and therefore not independent. Now even if the “infection” claim is correct (whatever that comes to) it doesn’t follow that there is not a widely shared *core* of moral experience that can be teased out of people’s overall moral phenomenology. For instance, consider two people, one of

¹⁷ Mikhail (2000), Hauser (2006).

whom is extremely religious and the other not. The former's religious beliefs saturate her moral experience, in that she experiences moral demands as having a divine and therefore objective source. The non-religious person, too, has moral experiences that are strongly objectivist; his moral experiences of obligation appear to him to be anchored in something external, though not in anything divine. Both individuals experience moral obligation as in some sense objectively grounded, even if in some other ways their moral experiences differ. Through certain forms of investigation, one might hope to isolate a pre-theoretical common core that is widely shared.

But will any such pre-theoretical core that is widely shared also be robust? We think this question must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. It may be that appeal to moral phenomenology in relation to some disputes helps narrow the field of strong competitors, but is equally compatible with more than one of the finalists. To be of use in ethical disputes, phenomenological data need not decisively favor some one theory over its other, sophisticated competitors. And, of course, phenomenological evidence is only one species of evidence that bears on ethical disputes, so one shouldn't expect it to be decisive, even in cases where such data does clearly favor one theory over its competitors. But, as we've said, what moral phenomenology can accomplish should be judged case by case.

So, let us now consider a few disputed issues where we think appeals to moral phenomenology play an important role.

Issues

Here, in rapid-fire succession and with very brief commentary, are four disputes in or about ethics in which considerations of moral phenomenology have played, and/or might play, a role.

1. *Consequentialism vs. deontology in normative ethics.* Interestingly, part of Mandelbaum's aim in his 1955 book was to argue against consequentialism, and in favor of deontology, on phenomenological grounds. He contended that moral experiences involving both direct and removed moral judgments are thoroughly deontological. We do not know whether Mandelbaum's sweeping claim is right. Here, we just note that he thought that moral phenomenology can be brought to bear on the issue, and that it favored one type of moral theory over one of its competitors.
2. *Atomism vs. holism about moral reasons in the theory of moral rationality.* Reasons atomism is the view that fundamental reasons in ethics are invariant in their relevance and valence: if a morally relevant consideration is a fundamental reason in one case, then it must always be morally relevant whenever instantiated, and relevant in the same way (either always counting in favor or always against a line of action). Reasons holism denies invariance, and maintains instead that the relevance and valence of even fundamental moral reasons are sensitive to context. Ross's theory of prima facie duties is apparently committed to reasons atomism – each of the seven considerations that provide grounds for a prima facie duty is presumably supposed to be invariant in the

way just mentioned. Mandelbaum argued against the adequacy of Ross's theory of prima facie duties, and in doing so presented phenomenological considerations against reasons atomism and in favor of reasons holism.¹⁸ Mandelbaum's case against atomism depended partly on the phenomenology of such reactive emotions as regret and remorse. We ourselves have holistic leanings based on considerations of moral phenomenology, but here our only point is that phenomenological considerations can be brought to bear, and fruitfully so, on this particular dispute in ethics.

3. *Intuitionism vs. rationalism in moral psychology.* By what psychological processes do individuals generally come to have or make moral judgments? Advocates of "rationalism" (as this term is used in the moral psychology literature) hold that, generally speaking, such judgments are the partial product of an individual's reasoning – reasoning in which rules or principles guide judgment. On the other hand, advocates of "intuitionism" (as psychologists use this term), such as Haidt (2001), hold instead that moral judgments are not the partial product of reasoning, but rather result from spontaneous gut-level emotional reactions. In recent years, intuitionism seems to have replaced rationalism as the going psychological hypothesis about moral judgment.

In one of our recent papers (2007), we mount a defense of a kind of psychological rationalism that we call "morphological rationalism". In defending this view we appeal to what we call the *phenomenology of non-jarringness*. This phenomenological feature is typically present in experiences of making or coming to have moral judgments, and also is typically present in experiences of explaining one's own moral judgments to others by citing reasons. Again, our point here is that phenomenology can be brought to bear, and usefully so, on this particular issue.

4. *Objectivism vs. non-objectivism in metaethics.* One argument for the claim that morality purports to be objective is what we have elsewhere called the argument from phenomenological introspection. According to this argument, there are aspects of common moral experience that are (a) introspectively manifest and that (b) carry "objectivist purport". The conclusion of the argument is that the phenomenology of moral experience provides *pro tanto* evidence in favor of moral objectivism. Now suppose an objectivist running this argument thinks that Mandelbaum's characterization of experiences of direct moral obligation is accurate. Then, arguably, the objectivist will want to dwell on what it is like to experience an action as being fitting or unfitting. Do such experiences involve elements that are both manifest to introspection and carry objectivist purport? In Horgan and Timmons (2008), we argue that the answer is no. Regardless of whether we are right about this matter, the point (once again) is that considerations of moral phenomenology do play an important role in debates over objectivism in ethics.

¹⁸ See Mandelbaum (1955: 71–93). Mandelbaum did not cast his objections to Ross's theory in terms of atomism versus holism about moral reasons; this terminology is of relatively recent vintage.

Conclusion

We maintain that moral phenomenology is more important than analytic philosophers since Moore have tended to realize. It also connects fairly directly with the recent surge of interest in empirical moral psychology that is having a significant impact on ethical inquiry.¹⁹ We hope and believe that this special issue of *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* is a harbinger of interesting work to come in moral phenomenology.

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¹⁹ See for example Nichols (2004), and Sinnott-Armstrong (2007b).