

Project Description

Illuminating Reasons: An Essay in Moral Phenomenology **Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons**

1. Introduction. Moral experience plays an undeniably important role in people's lives, and although moral philosophers often take account of such experience in theorizing about morality, to our knowledge there has not been a systematic philosophical treatise about moral experience (at least in English) since Maurice Mandelbaum's 1955 *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*. Our proposal is to write a monograph in which we systematically explore various interrelated philosophical issues about moral thought and discourse that can benefit from attention to the rich phenomenology of moral experience.

Phenomenology involves both a distinctive subject matter and an associated methodology. Its subject matter is introspectively accessible features of one's current mental life. Its method incorporates introspective attention to current experience, introspective judgment-formation concerning the features of current experience, and interpersonal corroboration of various kinds. One important form of corroboration arises when others read or hear a given first-person characterization of some aspect of experience and find that characterization to be aptly descriptive of features they recognize in their own mental lives. *Moral* phenomenology focuses on mental states with moral content. Concrete experiences of feeling morally obligated, of judging that some action or character trait is morally good, of having feelings of shame, or guilt, or gratitude—such experiences are all examples of the subject matter of moral phenomenology.

Phenomenological inquiry was largely neglected in the English-speaking world for much of the twentieth century, both in philosophy and in psychology. In psychology, this was largely because introspective methods were regarded as unreliable and non-rigorous; in philosophy, it was largely because of a long-dominant emphasis on language (the "linguistic turn"). But the situation is changing. Psychologists are increasingly paying attention to the first-person experiential aspects of human mentality in general and human moral experience specifically, and are finding ways to integrate experiential reports with rigorous techniques of behavior-measurement and corroboration. In philosophy, the earlier centrality of philosophy of language is increasingly being displaced by emphasis on issues in philosophy of mind, and phenomenology is much in the air. Although introspective reports about one's current experience are certainly fallible, such reports nevertheless are a very rich source of data—data that can and should inform theorizing in psychology and in philosophy. The time is ripe for book-length treatment of moral phenomenology, with emphasis on its potential lessons both for moral psychology and moral philosophy.

The book we envision will focus on several guiding questions, each to be addressed in light of evidence adduced from moral phenomenology. We will begin with these:

1. Do reasons play a significant role in moral experience and moral belief-formation?
2. Do principles play a significant role in moral experience and moral belief-formation?
3. Should principles play such a role?

We will argue, contrary to an influential line of thought in contemporary moral psychology called "intuitionism," that the answer to questions 1 and 2 is Yes. And we will argue, contrary to

a prominent position in contemporary moral philosophy called “particularism,” that the answer to the third question is also Yes. This leads to a further question:

4. What role (or roles) do reasons and principles play?

We will argue that reasons and principles play at least two importantly distinguishable roles, which we call the requiring role and the favoring role. The differences between these roles allow one to make sense of certain important moral categories whose intelligibility is contested by some contemporary philosophers—e.g., supererogatory actions (those that are morally good—even morally best—but are but obligatory), gratitude, and the notion of a ‘debt’ of gratitude. A further key question is this:

5. How do reasons and principles play a role (or roles)?

One important partial answer to this question, we will maintain, is that reasons-sensitivity is a feature of morally charged, often affect-laden, *evaluative perception*—and that having the capacity for such perceptual experience is partly constitutive of being a morally virtuous agent. Another important partial answer is that reasons and principles that figure in the justificatory rationale for a given moral belief often operate *implicitly* in moral experience and moral belief-formation, rather than being explicitly brought to mind: they affect the character of conscious experience in a phenomenologically subtle way that we call “chromatic illumination.” (The metaphor is intended to evoke a visual scene that is illuminated in specific ways by light-sources outside the scene.) Finally, there is this question:

6. How (if at all) do the answers to the preceding questions bear on the issue of objectivity of moral thought and discourse?

We will maintain, contrary to those in moral philosophy who claim that morality is a matter merely of attitudes such as liking and disliking, or a matter merely of socially reinforced injunctions and prohibitions, that the distinctive roles of reasons in moral experience and moral belief-formation constitute a very important form of objectivity in matters moral.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of our project in which we explain in more detail how we plan to address our questions by making use of the rich data of moral phenomenology. We then provide an annotated table of contents as we now envision the book. This is followed by remarks about the methodology associated with phenomenological inquiry—a topic that is, of course, important for our project, but that has also received much attention in recent philosophical and psychological literature. Included at the end are a select, topically organized bibliography, and a list of our joint publications on moral phenomenology.

2. Overview. Influential recent work in moral psychology by psychologists like Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Greene (e.g., Green and Haidt 2001) has made prominent a certain conception of moral belief-formation that has been receiving further articulation in the work of philosophers like John Doris. Parts of this conception are explicit in their writings, and others are at least strongly suggested and/or implicitly presupposed. The conception is roughly the following. Moral belief-formation is describable by a “dual process” model. (For a useful overview of dual process models in psychology see Chaiken and Trope 1999 and more recently, Kahneman 2011) *Reasons* in favor of moral beliefs play a very limited role in moral experience, and in the psychological processes that generate moral beliefs. Instead, most moral judgments arise from “system 1”—they involve rapidly operative affective responses that are not sensitive to moral reasons. (Sometimes “system 2” gets engaged: slower, reflective, cognitive processing that is reasons-sensitive and applies utilitarian moral principles. But deployment of system 2 is

exceptional rather than typical.) Reason-giving after the fact, in contexts where one explicitly justifies one's moral belief to oneself or to others, typically is post hoc confabulation. Even conscious moral deliberation is very often, to a very great extent, really a matter of an internal psychological struggle in system 1 among competing affective responses that are not themselves sensitive to reasons—although these competing affective responses often tend to generate, in the mind of the agent, competing rationales. Those rationales are confabulations too, and do not actually figure causally in the affect-driven belief-forming process that is misleadingly called “deliberation.”

One key theme in our book will be a significantly different conception of moral experience and moral belief-formation, which we will defend largely by appeal to phenomenological evidence. In our view, moral belief-formation (both spontaneous and deliberative) typically is highly sensitive to justificatory reasons and to pertinent moral principles. Normally a great deal of the full body of information that collectively constitutes the justificatory rationale for a given moral belief is accommodated *implicitly and automatically* in moral experience, rather than becoming explicitly conscious. Implicit appreciation of background reasons does affect the character of conscious experience, however; this is what we call chromatic illumination. Reason-giving, both after the fact and in the course of conscious deliberation, normally is not confabulation at all; rather, it makes explicit certain salient parts of the overall reason-constituting rationale for a given moral belief. Affect can and does play a very important role in moral experience and moral belief-formation, and certainly can sometimes distort it. But in a wise and morally virtuous agent, affective elements of moral experience are not at all blind to reasons; on the contrary, affective responses like indignation, guilt, remorse, or gratitude are highly reasons-sensitive, and are themselves a manifestation of the chromatic illumination of moral experience by reasons. We call this position “chromatic rationalism.” (This use of the term ‘rationalism’ aligns more closely with its recent use in moral psychology—the contrast term in psychology being ‘intuitionism’—than with its long-time use in moral philosophy—the contrast term in philosophy being ‘sentimentalism’).

Chromatic illumination, as we will argue in the book, is well illustrated by a phenomenon we find especially rich and revealing: joke-getting. For virtually any joke of even moderate sophistication, the experience of getting the joke requires one to instantaneously appreciate quite a large background of pertinent information, and to instantaneously appreciate a richly holistic network of interconnections among this information; otherwise, one simply would not get the joke. Typically, very little of this informational background gets explicitly represented in consciousness. Nonetheless, the background does affect conscious experience: one consciously gets the joke; this requires appreciating the *specific* funniness of this joke in particular; and that requires the full pertinent informational background to be *implicit* in the conscious experience even though most of it is not explicitly present. (One doesn't find oneself laughing and wondering why.) One's implicit experiential appreciation of that rich informational background can be probed by asking a variety of pertinent questions about the joke-scenario, any of which the joke-understander could answer instantly and accurately. The expression ‘chromatic illumination’ aptly characterizes the effects in consciousness of implicit background information: the idea is that the full informational background profoundly affects the character of conscious experience, even though most of that background is not explicitly present in consciousness.

When one contemplates everyday experiences of moral belief-formation while bearing in mind the question of pertinent background information that plausibly figures in the justificatory rationale for the given belief, the phenomenology of chromatic illumination reveals itself to introspective attention. Here is a hypothetical scenario to illustrate the point. Nicholas is a university professor who has been working in his office on campus catching up on email; today is the first day of final-examination week. He is behind on completing a scholarly article that is due tomorrow, for a volume to which he has been invited to contribute. (He already asked for an extension on the original due date of a month ago, and the editors gave him until tomorrow.) He is just leaving his office to go to his carrel at the university library, where he plans to spend the rest of the afternoon working on the paper without any interruptions or distractions. He knows that he needs this long afternoon of uninterrupted work in order to submit the article by tomorrow. As he is about to head down the hall to his left and out the building, he spots a student named Tom coming up the stairs to his right. Tom is a student in Nicholas's symbolic logic class. Tom has struggled all semester with the course material, and occasionally has come for help during Nicholas's office hours—although not during any of the extensive office-hours that Nicholas held in the final days before final-exam week. Tom has not yet seen Nicholas, and Nicholas recognizes a brief opportunity to get away down the hall without Tom seeing him. Nicholas hesitates just an instant, but then reluctantly turns back, unlocks and re-enters his office, and resigns himself to what is liable to be a long session helping Tom prepare for tomorrow's final exam in symbolic logic. Nicholas realizes that he is not obligated to stay and help Tom, and he realizes that doing so will mean failing to submit the completed article on its due date tomorrow. But he has decided staying and helping is the morally best thing to do, all things considered.

Nicholas's returning to his office is a morally beneficent act: in the circumstances: it is supererogatory rather than obligatory. (He is not holding office hours today, and held ample extra office hours in the preceding week that Tom should have taken advantage of but didn't.) This scenario can be plausibly elaborated in a way that introduces quite a rich background of pertinent information that is known to Nicholas—information much of which does not become explicitly present in Nicholas's consciousness prior to his nearly-instantaneous decision to return to his office, but which nonetheless might very well be chromatically illuminating his moral belief-forming experience. We may stipulate that the relevant background facts, all known by Nicholas, include the following. Tom needs at least a C in the course to graduate this semester, and so far has performed at minimum-C level. Tom has a job lined up that he is enthusiastic about, and he needs a college diploma in order to be eligible for the job. Tom has several times made special appointments with Nicholas to get help with the course material, and then has failed to show up for those appointments. Although Tom has been inconsiderate and immature by missing those appointments, he seems to be a fairly decent person anyway—not a conniving manipulator (as are some other students in the class). As for the article that Nicholas is supposed to deliver by tomorrow, although the editors of the volume probably will be annoyed (having already granted him a deadline-extension on the firm condition that he submit the article no later than tomorrow), a further delay of a day or two would not greatly inconvenience them in preparing the volume. They are very likely to include his article in the volume even if he delivers it a day or two late—especially if he sends them a lavishly apologetic email explaining why he will miss the deadline and when he will deliver the article.

Examples like this bring into focus the extent to which intelligent moral-belief formation appears to be informed by pertinent background information that chromatically illuminates moral experience without becoming consciously explicit. Here too, as with cases of joke-getting, the person who undergoes such an experience typically can readily answer a host of suitable probe-questions concerning the matters pertinent to the justificatory basis of the moral belief. And the person typically will experience those answers as *being* pertinent in a justificatory way. This kind of phenomenological evidence, we maintain, accords better with the chromatic-rationalist conception of human moral psychology than with an intuitionist conception asserting that moral belief-formation typically occurs without sensitivity to justificatory reasons.

Even if moral-belief formation is indeed highly reasons-sensitive, as we maintain, the question remains whether general moral *principles* play an important role in grounding concrete moral judgments. According to “particularism,” an influential recent movement in moral philosophy (Dancy, 1993, 2004), the answer is No. (The contrast term is “generalism,” which embraces normative moral principles that have general scope and supposedly ground specific moral verdicts concerning specific situations.) Another key idea in our book, which we will defend largely by appeal to phenomenological evidence, is a qualified form of generalism: the factors that constitute the full justificatory rationale for a given moral belief typically include moral principles—principles that normally operate chromatically in moral belief-formation, rather than being consciously rehearsed. These principles are not exceptionless, however, and cannot be applied in a rote and automatic way.

The hypothetical case of Nicholas and Tom illustrates these claims. Were Nicholas to be asked whether some general principle can be invoked to *justify* his decision to return to his office and help Tom prepare for the exam—an act that he knew would cause him to violate his promise to deliver the article tomorrow—he would be apt to say something like this: “When something morally important like a student’s future is at stake and very likely depends on whether or not one takes a certain non-obligatory action, but taking that action would result in one’s being unable to fulfill a prior commitment concerning a comparatively unimportant matter, then (all else equal) it is better to perform that non-obligatory action.” Were he to be asked whether a principle *explains* why he decided to return, he would say yes. However, were he to be asked whether he mentally rehearsed such a principle and consciously applied it to the case at hand, he would say no. Chromatic rationalism accommodates such phenomenological evidence smoothly and plausibly—more smoothly and more plausibly than psychological intuitionism, which would construe Nicholas’s nearly-instantaneous moral decision as the product of a reasons-blind emotional gut reaction, and would construe his subsequent answers to those questions as mere post-hoc confabulation.

Another key idea in our book will be the claim that reasons play two importantly different roles in moral experience and moral belief-formation: a favoring role and a requiring role. Moral philosophers have not infrequently failed to appreciate the distinctness of the two roles—which has sometimes led them to claim that categories like the supererogatory are conceptually incoherent. The evidence from moral phenomenology strongly suggests otherwise. In our hypothetical case of Nicholas and Tom, for example, the natural moral response to the case is Nicholas’s: he forms the belief that returning to his office and helping Tom is the morally *best* thing to do in the circumstances, even though it is not morally obligatory. This response is

chromatically illuminated by an implicit appreciation of background reasons that strongly (indeed, decisively) *favor* the non-obligatory action. In the book we will focus too on subtly complex ways that reasons can operate in moral phenomenology—for instance in cases of gratitude, where there is an aspect of being “in between” merely-favoring and outright requiring.

Yet another important idea we will stress is that moral experience is often perceptual in nature, and that moral-perception experience is frequently affect-laden. Advocates of psychological intuitionism tend to assume that when a moral belief is triggered by an affective response—especially in the case of a spontaneous moral judgment that arises in “system one”—neither the affective response nor the moral belief are sensitive to reasons. But here too, the evidence from moral phenomenology strongly suggests otherwise. A phenomenologically plausible version of the case of Nicholas and Tom would be one in which Nicholas’s near-instantaneous decision is largely triggered by an affective response of *sympathy* toward Tom, and perhaps also in part by a looming awareness of potential *guilt-experience* were he to head off to the library rather than returning to his office. The overall conception of the wise and virtuous moral agent that is best supported by the phenomenological evidence is this: such an agent is someone who routinely undergoes affect-laden moral perception that is richly chromatically illuminated by pertinent background reasons—sometimes requiring-reasons, sometimes favoring-reasons, sometimes a complex combination of the two.

Finally, there is the issue of objectivity. Phenomenological considerations will be brought to bear in support of the claim that there really does exist at least one important form of moral objectivity, and also in support of the claim that the significance of such objectivity is the distinctive motivational role it plays in human psychology. Moral reasons, when experienced either as playing a requiring role or as playing a favoring role, are experienced not as emanating from self-interested desires or from the self-interested goal of avoiding socially implemented sanctions, but rather as grounded externally—as a matter of *fittingness*. The distinctive experiential character of moral reasons—as externally grounded, as independent of one’s pre-existing desires, and as intrinsically motivational—constitutes a key and fundamental form of objectivity in morals.

The intended audience for this research comprises philosophers and psychologists who work on ethics and moral psychology, graduate students and advanced undergraduates in philosophy and in psychology, and thoughtful people in the wider reading public who have an interest in the topics we address.

3. Annotated Table of Contents.

Chapter 1, Phenomenology in Focus. We discuss the subject-matter of phenomenology and its methodology. We explain why moral phenomenology can provide important forms of data to inform both moral psychology and normative moral theory. We address skeptical doubts sometimes raised both in psychology and in philosophy about first-person introspective phenomenological inquiry, and we argue that there are corroborative and behavioral-measure techniques that can go a long way toward addressing these doubts and yielding reliable phenomenological data. (In the following section, we make further remarks about issues of methodology.)

Chapter 2, *Illuminating Experience*. We focus on some representative examples of the phenomenon of joke-getting, to illustrate and explicate the notion of chromatic illumination of conscious experience by implicit background information. We argue, using a variety of illustrative examples, that chromatic illumination is a very common feature of human experience, especially in cases of belief-formation.

Chapter 3, *Kinds of Chromaticism*. We address this question: How might the chromatic illumination of conscious experience by background information be implemented in human cognitive architecture? We set forth a line of argument, developed at length elsewhere by one of us (Horgan) and John Tienson in their 1996 book *Connectionism and the Philosophy of Psychology*, in support of the claim that processes like planning and belief-updating need to operate via standing structure in the cognitive architecture that automatically accommodates enormous amounts of pertinent background information without deploying explicit representations of that information. (Horgan and Tienson describe a general framework for cognitive science that gives a central role to this contention—a framework largely inspired by the “connectionist” approach to cognitive-science modeling that first came to prominence in the late 1980’s. We will sketch the key ideas in the book’s Appendix.) We emphasize that this conception of chromatic illumination does fit nicely with the character of conscious experience—in particular, with the ease and rapidity with which chromatic illumination often occurs (e.g., in joke-getting).

Chapter 4, *Responding to Reasons*. We consider two broad types of moral experience: spontaneous moral belief-formation (often accompanied by spontaneous behavioral comportment) and moral deliberation. We describe various aspects of the phenomenology of spontaneous moral belief-formation that are reasons-responsive in a way analogous to the phenomenology of spontaneous joke-getting—aspects of rich chromatic illumination by pertinent background information. Concerning moral deliberation, we describe a host of ways in which the experiential components of an ongoing deliberative process are themselves chromatically illuminated by reason-relevant and reason-constituting background information.

Chapter 5, *Particularity in Principles*. We argue that moral normativity, and hence suitably competent moral belief-formation, normally does involve the application (typically, via chromatic illumination) of certain kinds of general principles, ones that are not exceptionless but instead are “defeasible.” (Defeasibility means that the principles have exceptions—and that the exceptions that are too heterogeneous in nature to be systematizable via exceptionless general principles that are *refinements* of the defeasible principles.) The argumentation is largely phenomenological. When one attends to realistic examples of moral reason-giving—and to the experience of giving explicit reasons or understanding explicitly stated reasons—one often finds either (i) that defeasible moral principles are explicitly invoked and are accorded moral-normative authority, or at any rate (ii) that it is very natural to further elaborate the operative justificatory rationale in a way that invokes authoritative defeasible moral principles. (One also finds, however, that appreciation of the applicability of a given defeasible principle normally takes place in a manner that is chromatically illuminated by pertinent background information—and that there is no natural or plausible way to subsume the specific scenario under some *exceptionless* general moral principle.)

Chapter 6, *Effects of Affect*. We argue that affective aspects of moral experience can, and often do, exhibit a high degree of reasons-sensitivity: often, chromatic illumination of experience by reasons is a matter of reasons-appropriate, principle-applying, affective responses. We adduce phenomenological evidence in support of this claim. For instance, quite often certain affective responses, such as outrage, are experienced diachronically as apt, and as smoothly comports with reasons that can be articulated for that aptness; i.e., the aspect of reasons-appropriateness persists, and is experienced as appropriate in light of subsequently articulated reasons. We argue that the hypothesis that affect often plays a reasons-responsive role in moral experience and moral belief-formation fits well with both phenomenological evidence and the evidence from moral psychology—better than the hypothesis that the role of affect is typically (or always) blind to reasons and principles. (Likewise, the former hypothesis fits better than the latter with “dual-process” models that are widely embraced in contemporary psychology, including moral psychology—models positing two interconnected cognitive systems, one fast and spontaneous and the other slower and deliberative.)

Chapter 7, *Modes of Moral Experience*. We discuss key ideas from Maurice Mandelbaum’s important but neglected mid-century book *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*. Mandelbaum gave an insightful and plausible account of experience of being “directly” morally obligated oneself, in one’s present circumstances, to perform a certain action. He rightly emphasized that such an experience involves an aspect of external demand, grounded in an experienced aspect of fittingness. But his phenomenological descriptions of other aspects of moral experience are inadequate in important ways. He does not adequately characterize experiences of imperfect duty—e.g., experiencing a given action (e.g., donating to the American Red Cross) as one, merely optional, way of meeting some general, non-specific, moral obligation (e.g., donating to charity). He does not discuss experiences of supererogation. He does not accurately describe the phenomenology of structurally complex moral experiences like gratitude. We underscore certain distinctive phenomenological features of these aspects of moral experience, as contrasted with experiences of direct moral obligation. We draw on these differences to describe the distinctive phenomenological aspects of supererogation and imperfect duty.

Chapter 8, *Reasons in Roles*. We extend the phenomenological discussion of the preceding chapter, using it to characterize an important generic aspect of moral experience, and also some importantly different species of the genus. Generically, moral experience involves an aspect of *ought-commitment*, as we call it—viz., commitment as to how things ought to be (or ought not to be). There are two importantly different species of generic ought-commitment, and the key differences involve the experiential role of reasons. On one hand, there are experiences of moral obligation: here, reasons figure in the experience as playing a *requiring* role, and normally are directed toward certain actions (actual or potential). On the other hand, there are experiences of moral goodness: here, reasons figure as playing a non-self-interested *favoring* role (and often, a *decisively favoring* role), and can be directed not only toward actions but also toward states of affairs (actual or potential). The distinctive motivational power of moral experiences and moral beliefs stems both from their nature as ought-commitments, and from the different kinds of non-self-interested roles of reasons in grounding these ought-commitments. We argue too that the distinction between requiring roles and non-self-interested favoring roles

actually marks two poles of a continuum, because of the kinds of “in between” reasons associated with moral experiences like gratitude.

Chapter 9, Objectivity and Its Objectors. We address the issue of objectivity in ethics: whether, and if so in what ways, morality is an objective matter—as opposed, for instance, to being a matter of mere attitudes such as liking and disliking, or a matter merely of socially enforced injunctions and prohibitions. Here we draw upon the discussion in the preceding two chapters to urge that the distinctive roles of reasons, in moral experience and moral belief-formation, constitute a very important form of objectivity in matters moral. Moral reasons, when experienced either as playing a requiring role or as playing a favoring role, are experienced not as emanating from self-interested desires, but rather as grounded externally—as a matter of *fittingness*. Moral reasons are experienced as intrinsic sources of motivation, independently of one’s pre-existing desires. The distinctive, motivationally charged, experiential character of moral reasons constitutes a fundamental form of objectivity in morals. In this chapter we also consider, critically, a form of phenomenological argument sometimes propounded in philosophy, to the effect that moral experience has what we call “ontological objective purport”—i.e., that moral experience represents the world as containing moral features and moral facts that are objectively “out there” in reality in the same robust way that features like size and shape, and facts like the number of moons around the planet Jupiter, are objectively “out there” independently of human experience. In response, we maintain that careful phenomenological inquiry, together with reflection on the powers and limits of introspection, favors a neutrality thesis—viz., that one cannot reliably ascertain, via introspection, whether or not moral experiences carry ontological objective purport.

Chapter 10, Ways Toward Wisdom. We bring together the lessons of preceding chapters to describe the resulting conception of the morally virtuous agent—a conception with important implications for the question of how best to enhance the acquisition of moral virtue. Moral wisdom typically involves affective perception: one perceives one’s circumstances as *calling for* a certain behavioral response, a response that presents itself as *morally fitting* in those circumstances; one thereby finds oneself with an affect-laden, motivationally charged, ought-commitment toward such an action; this experience is chromatically illuminated by implicit appreciation of a rich background of implicit knowledge (including pertinent defeasible principles), in virtue of which certain salient factors present themselves as reasons for the given action. Such reasons-sensitive affective perception is largely spontaneous, while also being subtly intelligent; it reflects cognitive and affective dispositions that have become deeply ingrained in the agent’s cognitive architecture.

Appendix, Finessing the Frame Problem. We summarize the overall line of argument in Horgan and Tienson’s 1996 book, *Connectionism and the Philosophy of Mind*, focusing in particular on the so-called frame problem, the seemingly recalcitrant challenge it presents to explain human cognition via computational modeling, and the lessons to be drawn from this problem as they bear on our case for key claims in chapters 2 and 6.

3. Methodology. People are certainly fallible in their beliefs about what goes on in their own minds. Psychologists have amply documented various kinds of fallibility of this general kind—e.g., in cases of mistaken memory-reports by eyewitnesses in jury cases (Loftus 2005) and in

cases of people's confabulated post-hoc explanations of their own prior actions (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Even so, however, people are normally quite good at forming accurate judgments about the nature of their own current conscious experience. Common sense suggests that this is so, but in addition, empirical psychological studies provide substantial further evidence for it. (See, for instance, Haggard and Johnson 2003.) Moreover, first-person judgments about the character of moral experience constitute a very rich source of *data* for psychological theory. Such data plays an important role in the field of moral psychology—for instance, in the work of McCullough, et. al. (2001) and Watkins, et. al. (2006) on the nature of gratitude.

Our own field is philosophy. One way to understand how philosophy can contribute to phenomenological inquiry is by analogy to the field of linguistics. Linguists who theorize about natural-language syntax often use their own spontaneous first-person judgments about the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of various word-strings as a source of data for syntactic theory. First-person phenomenology plays a key role here: the initial question is whether the word-string *seems* grammatical or not—a question about the character of one's language-understanding *experience*. The linguist treats seeming-grammaticality (or seeming-ungrammaticality) as evidence of grammaticality (or ungrammaticality) itself, on the defeasible presumption that the experiential seeming-state is the product of the linguist's own grammatical competence. The phenomenological character of the linguist's own language-understanding experience thereby does double duty as evidence: it is evidentially relevant both to the theory of natural-language syntax, and also to the cognitive psychology of human language-processing. Sometimes a linguistic seeming-experience gets treated as non-veridical, especially when it conflicts with an otherwise well-supported syntactic theory and there is a plausible psychological explanation of how such mistakes arise—as in cases of grammatical, but ungrammatical-seeming, center-embedded sentences like “Dogs dogs dog dog dogs.” (Bear in mind that ‘dog’ can be a verb in English, and compare the sentence to ‘Cats dogs chase catch mice’.) The linguist, in the course of generating various word-strings and ascertaining whether or not they seem grammatical, is producing pertinent *empirical data* for linguistic theory and for cognitive psychology—data in the form of first-person judgments about the phenomenological character of the linguist's own language-understanding experience. The linguist is also well positioned, when seeking to test some specific hypothesis about natural-language syntax, to generate especially pertinent first-person data: seek out word-strings that the given hypothesis predicts will be grammatical (or ungrammatical), and check whether one's linguistic experiences vis-à-vis those word-strings conform well to the hypothesis.

The philosopher can play an analogous role with respect to issues in moral philosophy and moral psychology. For instance, one can describe concrete hypothetical scenarios, and one can then attend to (and describe) the phenomenological character of one's affective reactions and moral-judgment forming experiences vis-à-vis those scenarios. In cases where such responses are especially clear and unequivocal, there is a defeasible presumption that they emanate from one's own competence in moral cognition; thus, the given scenarios can be expected to prompt similar moral responses in other people—including people who read one's own first-person descriptions. This kind of first-person data, susceptible to third-person introspective corroboration, does double duty as evidence: it is evidentially relevant both to ethical theorizing in philosophy, and to the psychology of moral cognition. Here too, as in linguistics, certain initial moral responses might sometimes conflict with otherwise well supported normative moral theory, and might get

treated as erroneous—especially when there is an independently plausible psychological explanation of how the mistake could arise (e.g., judging some action to be morally wrong because one finds it disgusting). And here too, as in linguistics, the philosopher who is seeking to test the viability of some specific hypothesis in ethical theory is well positioned to generate especially pertinent data: seek out scenarios that the theory entails will exhibit certain moral features (e.g., the feature of making a certain act count as morally obligatory in the circumstances), and check whether one’s affective reactions and one’s moral judgment-forming experiences conform well with the hypothesis. This same kind of phenomenological inquiry can be brought to bear on other kinds of pertinent scenarios too—e.g., scenarios involving the experience of explicitly giving reasons in order to justify a moral judgment already made.

Another familiar role that philosophers sometimes play is to look over the shoulders of scientists, scrutinizing their work from the perspective of philosophy of science. Such scrutiny can involve, for instance, identifying implicit assumptions underlying the scientists’ abductive inferences from their data to their theoretical hypotheses, setting forth plausible alternative hypotheses, exploring the evidential relevance of other kinds of data, and giving reasons why the evidence might, on balance, favor the alternative hypotheses. Our overall line of argumentation in the book will be an instance of this kind of trans-disciplinary philosophical inquiry: we will articulate and defend a conception of moral belief-formation that differs importantly from a currently influential conception emanating from contemporary moral psychology, and we will argue that our conception is better supported by the full body of pertinent evidence. Some of that evidence has been garnered by moral psychologists themselves, and has been invoked by them in support of the conception of moral-belief formation that we will be challenging. (Much recent psychological work has demonstrated, for example, that affect often plays a bigger role in moral belief-formation than is commonly recognized.) But in addition—and importantly—there is the *phenomenological* evidence that we will be heavily emphasizing. A guiding theme of our book is that when such phenomenological data is taken into account, alongside data from experimental moral psychology together with other considerations from cognitive science, the conception of moral belief-formation that we ourselves favor fares better in terms of accommodating and explaining the pertinent data in a plausible and unified way.

5. Select Bibliography

We have organized the following bibliography according to the various main topics we address in our book. For each topic we list only a very select set of the many articles and books (both from the philosophical and empirical literature) that bear importantly on our project. Entries are listed once, though many of them fit under more than one topic.

Phenomenology and Introspective Methodology

- Baars, B. J. 1997. “Contrastive Phenomenology: A Thoroughly Empirical Approach to Consciousness,” in N. J. Block, O. Flanagan, and G. Guzeldere, eds., *The Nature of Consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York: Harper & Row.

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6. Select Titles and Abstracts

Below are titles, abstracts, and links to our published articles and book chapters that are directly relevant to our John Templeton Foundational grant proposal. They are listed chronologically.

Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory, *Philosophical Issues*, 15, Normativity (2005): 56-77. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract: This essay raises the following foundational questions about moral phenomenology and its relation to moral theory: (1) Which phenomena does moral phenomenology purport to describe? (scope); (2) How much unity is there among the various sorts of experiences characteristic of moral experience? (unity); (3) What (if anything) is distinctive of moral experiences? (distinctiveness); (4) Are there any reasons to believe that a phenomenological approach to philosophical questions in moral theory is superior to, or at any rate usefully

supplemental to, other approaches? (motivation); (5) What results might one reach about philosophical issues in moral theory (including both normative moral theory and metaethics) on the basis of a phenomenological description of moral experience? (potential payoff).

Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral Judgment, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 10 (2007): 279–295. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. According to rationalism regarding the psychology of moral judgment, people’s moral judgments are generally the result of a process of reasoning that relies on moral principles or rules. By contrast, intuitionist models of moral judgment hold that people generally come to have moral judgments about particular cases on the basis of gut-level, emotion-driven intuition, and do so without reliance on reasoning and hence without reliance on moral principles. In recent years the intuitionist model has been forcefully defended by Jonathan Haidt. One important implication of Haidt’s model is that in giving reasons for their moral judgments people tend to confabulate – the reasons they give in attempting to explain their moral judgments are not really operative in producing those judgments. Moral reason-giving on Haidt’s view is generally a matter of post hoc confabulation. Against Haidt, we argue for a version of rationalism that we call ‘morphological rationalism.’ We label our version ‘morphological’ because according to it, the information contained in moral principles is embodied in the standing structure of a typical individual’s cognitive system, and this morphologically embodied information plays a causal role in the generation of particular moral judgments. The manner in which the principles play this role is via ‘proceduralization’ – such principles operate automatically. In contrast to Haidt’s intuitionism, then, our view does not imply that people’s moral reason giving practices are matters of confabulation. In defense of our view, we appeal to what we call the ‘nonjarring’ character of the phenomenology of making moral judgments and of giving reasons for those judgments.

Prolegomena to a Future Phenomenology of Morals, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7 (2008): 115–131. ([Download PDF](#))

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.

What Does Moral Phenomenology Tell Us About Moral Objectivity? *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 25 (2008): 267-300. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. We focus on what we call the “argument from phenomenological introspection” that some philosophers use in attempting to defend the view that the data of moral phenomenology provides evidence in favor of the claim that ordinary moral experience carries ontological objectivist purport. These philosophers then argue that only some form of ontological moral realism can accommodate the relevant data of moral phenomenology. In

our article, we argue for the following two claims. First, we argue that careful attention to the phenomenology of experiences of moral obligation reveals that the phenomenological data in question is neutral with regard to whether such experiences carry the kind of strong ontological objectivist purport that is only compatible with versions of objectivist moral realism. Second, we argue that this data does nevertheless provide (defeasible) evidence for a form of moral objectivity, but a form that does not require there to be the kinds of moral properties and facts associated with versions of ontological moral realism.

What Does the Frame Problem Tell us About Moral Normativity? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 12 (2009): 25-51. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. Within cognitive science, mental processing is often construed as computation over mental representations—i.e., as the manipulation and transformation of mental representations in accordance with rules of the kind expressible in the form of a computer program. This foundational approach has encountered a long-standing, persistently recalcitrant, problem often called the frame problem; it is sometimes called the relevance problem. In this paper we describe the frame problem and certain of its apparent morals concerning human cognition, and we argue that these morals have significant import regarding both the nature of moral normativity and the human capacity for mastering moral normativity. The morals of the frame problem bode well, we argue, for the claim that moral normativity is not fully systematizable by exceptionless general principles, and for the correlative claim that such systematizability is not required in order for humans to master moral normativity.

Moorean Moral Phenomenology, in S. Nuccetelli and G. Seay, eds., *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009): 203-226. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. G. E. Moore and post-Moorean analytic moral philosophy did not pay much attention to moral phenomenology, one should not conclude that the works of Moore and others are not of phenomenological significance; far from it. In particular, Moore's open question argument has phenomenological significance, we maintain, and ought to be reflected in an adequate phenomenological characterization of moral experience. Explaining this remark is the main task of the present paper. Specifically, our aim is to focus on a certain type of moral experience that is intended to capture what we take to be the fundamental lesson of Moore's open question argument: the ineliminability and irreducibility of moral normativity. The result will be a decidedly Moorean moral phenomenology, even if Moore himself might not have endorsed our particular version of it.

Mandelbaum on Moral Phenomenology and Moral Realism, in I. F. Versteegan, ed., *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism*, London: Routledge (2010): 103-126. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. In our contribution to this volume on Mandelbaum's philosophy, we first present some of the main elements of Mandelbaum's account of the phenomenology of moral experience, and then we proceed to critically examine some of Mandelbaum's metaethical views, including his apparent commitment to some form of moral realism based which he based on an argument from phenomenological introspection.

Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the 'Paradox' of Supererogation, *Social Philosophy & Policy* 27 (2010): 29-63. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. A supererogatory act is one that is “beyond the call of duty” and also morally meritorious. There seem to be many clear instances of such actions, the most spectacular of which we attribute to heroes and saints who we often read about in history books, newspapers, magazine articles, and on the internet. However, if an action is morally meritorious, then there must be good moral reasons to perform it, and if so, then presumably those moral reasons are strong enough to make the action in question something one *ought* morally to do. But then the supposedly supererogatory act is *not* beyond the call of duty; it *is* one’s duty. This is the so-called paradox of supererogation: how, in light of the foregoing can one make sense of supererogation, if indeed it is possible to do so? Anti-supererogationists deny the coherence of the category; pro-supererogationists attempt to make good sense of it. We are on the “pro” side of this debate, and in this paper we plan to address the paradox of supererogation, but in a way that is not common among philosophers who have written about the topic. We distinguish two methodological perspectives that can inform one’s theorizing about supererogation: an essentially third person “spectator” perspective and a first person “agentive” perspective. Most philosophical approaches are informed mainly (if not wholly) by a spectator’s perspective on the topic of supererogation. We think this is a mistake that has thwarted the pro-supererogationist cause. We argue that taking seriously the introspective reports of experiences of those who perform heroic, saintly, and other acts that are typically classified as supererogatory, will provide us with a subtler, more nuanced set of descriptions that will in turn suggest a more nuanced set of conceptual materials for addressing the paradox. In short, we argue that what will help the cause of pro-supererogationists is an investigation into the phenomenology of supererogation.

Introspection and the Phenomenology of Free Will: Problems and Prospects, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 18 (2011): 180–205. ([Download PDF](#))

Abstract. Inspired and informed by the work of Russ Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel in their *Describing Inner Experience*, we do two things in this commentary. First, we discuss the degree of reliability that introspective methods might be expected to deliver across a range of types of experience. Second, we explore the phenomenology of agency as it bears on the topic of free will. We pose a number of potential problems for attempts to use introspective methods to answer various questions about the phenomenology of free-will experience — questions such as this: does such experience have metaphysical-libertarian satisfaction conditions? We then discuss the prospects for overcoming some of these problems via approaches such as Hurlburt’s DES methodology, the so-called ‘talk aloud’ protocol, and forms of abduction that combine introspection with non-introspection-based forms of evidence.