

An Argument for Non-Discursive Moral Understanding

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Extant accounts of moral understanding focus predominantly on the grasp of moral propositions.¹ The accounts on offer conceive of moral understanding in different ways, but each account seems to turn on a subject's understanding that *q* is why *p*. In this paper, I suggest that a satisfactory account of moral understanding must be able to explain moral meaning that is grasped prior to, and independently of, discursive articulation. To motivate this claim, I examine a case of putative non-discursive moral understanding. If moral meaning can be grasped non-discursively, then moral understanding cannot be exhausted by propositional content alone.

Since the early aughts, there have been around a dozen articles published on the discrete topic of moral understanding. The literature is relatively focalized around a single debate: whether another person's testimony could be reasonably relied upon for moral action like a person's testimony can be relied upon for, say, directions to a destination (Boyd, 2020; Hopkins, 2007; Howell, 2014).

One way to frame the moral understanding debate is by grouping accounts of moral understanding into two camps: reductionist and non-reductionist. The reductionists assert that moral understanding is reducible to knowledge. A notable proponent of reductionism, Paulina Sliwa, puts it this way: "According to reductionism, knowledge is all there is to understanding; there is no need to stipulate a novel cognitive state that goes over and beyond knowledge" (2017, p. 526). In support of Sliwa's reductionist account, Riaz contends that "grasping and seeing [which are commonly thought of as the beyond-knowledge cognitive aspect of understanding] are ways of knowing" (2015, p. 128).

Sliwa situates her position as a response to Alison Hills, who argues, first, that moral knowledge is not a necessary condition for moral understanding and that moral understanding is captured notably in cognitive control of moral reasons: "Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true" (2009, p. 101). Hills's account and other non-reductionist accounts are sometimes referred to as ability accounts or manipulationist accounts, where understanding culminates in an ability to manipulate what one understands for new uses (Callahan, 2018;

¹ See, for instance, Belkoniene (2024), Callahan (2018), Dishaw (2024), Hills (2016), Howard (2018), Kelp (2024), Nickel (2001), Riaz (2015), Ross (2020), and Sliwa (2017).

Howell, 2014; Nickel, 2001). By contrast, reductionist accounts emphasize explanation rather than ability, stressing that understanding is captured in being able to explain why p .

We could say then that according to the reductionists, when we understand moral content, we possess a mental state analogous to the mental state of knowing that p . According to the non-reductionists, however, when we understand moral content, we possess a mental ability to use understanding p for further cognition, like inference-making, which the non-reductionists suggest is not necessarily the case for merely knowing that p . Notably, there is very little, if any, discussion in this space that attempts to explain why these kinds of understanding could not be stated in terms of knowledge-why, knowledge-how, knowledge-of. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the existing accounts of moral understanding build out from the basis that understanding at least minimally entails understanding that q is why p . Regardless of distinctions between them, the accounts all share the same fulcrum: whatever understanding is, it pivots around why p .

Framing the debate this way brings a further assumption into view. The shared emphasis on grasping why-relations presupposes that the content of moral understanding is discursive in character. Whether understanding is identified with a body of knowledge or with an ability to control reasons, it is treated as a cognitive achievement whose object is already propositionally structured. As a result, the question of moral understanding is settled in advance in favor of cases where an agent can articulate why p . What drops out of view are cases in which an agent appears to grasp moral meaning without yet having the conceptual or linguistic resources to express that grasp.

If moral understanding is assumed to be discursive in this way, then cases of inarticulate moral sense will appear, at best, epistemically defective. But this assumption is far from innocent, considering that a significant aspect of moral life is that we can grasp moral meaning without having the language to express that meaning.² In other words, moral understanding can happen pre-discursively, which is to say before its expression in propositional form (cf. Congdon, 2023).

² Such a phenomenon has gone by a few names including Matthew Congdon's (2023) "discursive breakdown" Miranda Fricker's (2006) "dissonance," and Jonathan Haidt's (Haidt et al., 2000) "moral dumbfounding," though each of these terms refers to different species of a gap between meaning and expression. Fricker famously argues that the experience of such a dissonance is sometimes itself an instance of epistemic injustice, where one lacks the hermeneutic resources not by chance or necessity but instead as a result of various systemic injustices, e.g., being marginalized and kept from spaces where such hermeneutic resources are acquired.

The moral understanding literature is split on whether the phenomenon of inarticulate moral sense constitutes understanding or not. Those who take an ability perspective of understanding, like Hills, offer a few different perspectives on why understanding requires an ability to articulate one's beliefs and reasons therewith. Some proceed in the intellectualist tradition, where "it is characteristic of a fully virtuous person to be aware of her reasons for action and to articulate them where necessary" (Hills, 2015, p. 33). Others reason that if understanding is an ability to make inferences to new cases, then understanding must entail being able to "articulate that insight in such a way as to generalize it" (Belkonien, 2024, p. 14). On the non-reductionist side, in which moral understanding is knowledge of right and wrong, there is more room to suggest that understanding can be inarticulate. Sliwa, for instance, says that ability accounts conflate "having moral understanding and having the ability to articulate it," which, says Sliwa, "are distinct abilities [that] can come apart" (2017, p. 541).

There are two aspects of the relationship between articulation and moral understanding that the existing conversation overlooks. First, whether inarticulate moral understanding is possible depends on the kind of moral content at issue, not merely on the agent's abilities. Second, articulation is not a neutral translation of antecedent content; it can transform the object of understanding itself and thus what one understands inarticulately is *sui generis*.

The consequence of a discursive requirement to moral understanding means that unnamed moral phenomena may be known but not understood. It could be argued that even knowledge ought to be withheld in these cases, but then we find ourselves in the undesirable position of having to claim that victims of unnamed moral harm neither understanding *nor* know the moral harm they experienced. This line of inquiry is curious because we could pry apart the moral harm itself and the experience of moral harm, granting that one could know when one has been harmed but merely have true belief about the moral harm itself. In this case, we might wonder why knowledge of having been morally harmed is not a kind of moral knowledge. I proceed on what I see as the more reasonable basis that one could know a moral harm and yet not understand it. Ultimately, the provision that understanding need be discursive erases an important distinction between two kinds of agents considered below—a discursive knower and a non-discursive understander.

Discursive knower. It is 2024 and Tom knows that sexual harassment is wrong. Tom also knows that giving unwanted compliments about someone's appearance constitutes sexual harassment. Ergo, Tom knows it is wrong to give unwanted compliments to someone about their appearance. However, Tom says he doesn't "really get why that's the case."

Non-discursive understander. It is 1950 and Clarence overhears Jerry, a coworker, say to Bella, an administrative assistant, “Keep wearing dresses like that—it really shows off your figure.” Clarence is struck by the wrongness of Jerry’s statement and tells Jerry that he shouldn’t have said it. Jerry is puzzled and says it was a compliment. Clarence struggles to articulate why the statement was wrong.

If articulation is necessary for understanding, then Clarence is merely a non-discursive knower and the difference between Clarence and Tom is that Tom can discursively express his knowledge. However, it seems that the substantive difference between Tom and Clarence is not that Tom’s linguistic milieu includes the concept of sexual harassment, but *rather* that Clarence has a grasp of the moral quality of sexual harassment whereas Tom only knows the moral claim. Is Tom essentially better positioned to understand the moral wrongness of the behavior we call sexual harassment than Clarence because Tom has theoretical access to a linguistic repertoire to which Clarence does not?

In non-moral matters, the question seems clearer: scientists today seem better positioned to understand atomic theory than did Parmenides. Yet, the comparison falters because of the fact that atomic theory is not merely a matter of articulation—it also follows the invention of new instruments, and so on. Sexual harassment, however, was not “hidden” in waiting until a new instrument was invented that enabled folks to observe it. What remains important is that moral understanding is not perfectly correlated to linguistic expression, a fact that preserves an important distinction between cases like Tom’s and Clarence’s. The cases also demonstrate that the nature of moral understanding as a comprehensive phenomenon is extra-propositional. By comprehensive phenomenon, I mean the thing, moral understanding, that admits understanding of the variety of moral content. Since some moral content can be understood without propositional expression, moral understanding goes beyond propositional content.

However, it might be said that the content of moral understanding in Clarence’s case is still principally propositional and maybe even discursive as-is. For instance, he has the capacity to say something like, “What Jerry said was wrong.” Further, perhaps the recognition that Jerry’s statement was wrong is ultimately traceable back to a sense of moral reasons that could be expressed in moral propositions related to dignity, privacy, propriety, and so on. In other words, just because Clarence doesn’t have a precise moral expression does not mean the content isn’t propositional in kind.

This argument is promising, but it ignores a key aspect of the phenomenon of moral articulation that I mentioned above, which is that the activity of moral articulation has a formative effect on the object of our articulation. This is because the naming of moral concepts, such as sexual harassment, is not the same activity as applying what Charles Taylor calls “simple description,” as with the “characterization of this table as brown, or this line of mountains as jagged” (1985, p. 36). In simple description (which is not to diminish the practical value of description), the object of our description remains unchanged; when we described the mountain range as jagged, the mountains do not change, though our understanding of the mountains may change, hence the enduring practical significance of description. Yet, when we articulate the behavior of unwanted compliments about one’s body in moral terms, we bring a moral concept into linguistic space such that the concept is formed.

To return to Clarence’s case and the effect of articulation, it stands to reason that Clarence’s understanding might *change* through the articulation process, but it would be a mistake to presume that Clarence’s understanding must have become “better” or “deeper.” All that extends from the preceding analysis of articulation is that articulation changes the object of understanding and therefore changes what it means to understand the object. Clarence may come to understand certain behavior *as* “sexual harassment,” but his understanding of the inarticulate phenomenon was not, by definition, deficient—rather, it was, by definition, *different*.

Consider Linda Martín Alcoff on this very phenomenon in the same context of sexual harassment:

There is a rather sensitive relationship between the way life appears and feels, and the conceptual repertoire we have available to us to describe it. And changes in the terms by which we bring experiences under a description can affect the actual things themselves – especially in so far as these are experiences – that are referred to by the terms. (2010, p. 136)

Alcoff demonstrates that the activity of naming some moral phenomenon, which inextricably involves experience of the phenomenon, has an effect on the phenomenon. Hence, the object of our moral understanding prior to its expression in language is *sui generis*. Clarence’s recognition of the moral wrongness of some behavior that we now call sexual harassment is not just a grasp of an unstated moral proposition; it is a distinctive mode of moral understanding oriented toward lived moral salience rather than articulated moral reasons. Therefore, because moral understanding can be possessed non-discursively

and because non-discursive meaning is unique, the broad phenomenon of moral understanding possesses an extra-propositional aspect.

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