Variability and moral phenomenology

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Abstract  Many moral philosophers in the Western tradition have used phenomenological claims as starting points for philosophical inquiry; aspects of moral phenomenology have often been taken to be anchors to which any adequate account of morality must remain attached. This paper raises doubts about whether moral phenomena are universal and robust enough to serve the purposes to which moral philosophers have traditionally tried to put them. Persons’ experiences of morality 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. Phenomenology may not be able to serve as a pre-theoretic starting point or anchor in the consideration of rival moral theories because moral phenomenology may itself be theory-laden. These doubts are illustrated through an examination of how moral phenomenology is used in the thought of Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, Joseph Butler, Francis Hutcheson, and Søren Kierkegaard.

Keywords  Moral phenomenology · Variability · Ralph Cudworth · Samuel Clarke · Joseph Butler · Francis Hutcheson · Søren Kierkegaard

Introduction

Many moral philosophers in the Western tradition have used phenomenological claims as starting points for philosophical inquiry.¹ Aspects of moral phenomenology have

¹Philosophers have often proceeded on the assumption that phenomenological description should have what Horgan and Timmons helpfully call “methodological priority” in moral theorizing (Horgan and Timmons 2005, p. 56 and p. 71). In this paper, I discuss how moral phenomenology was used by Cudworth, Clarke, Hutcheson, Butler, and Kierkegaard. Phenomenology was used in similarly methodologically prior ways by various twentieth century philosophers, such as: Mandelbaum (1969), who used moral phenomenology to argue against teleological normative theories; Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1990), who used phenomenology to try to adjudicate between Kohlberg and Gilligan’s disputes over the nature of moral development; and Dancy (1986), who used an “argument from phenomenology” to try to advance a realist conception of value.

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often been taken to be anchors to which any adequate account of morality must remain attached. Many moral philosophers in the Western tradition have also been in the business of developing universal theories of morality. Traditional philosophical accounts of morality have been offered as true not only of some people but of everyone.

The universal scope of traditional moral theories and the use of moral phenomenology as an anchor in the development of those theories together imply that all experiences of morality share some significant common elements. They imply that we can identify phenomenological features that both accurately reflect what morality is like for everyone and are robust enough to constitute a reason to accept one moral theory rather than another.

The question I want to ask here is whether the phenomena in question are universal and robust enough to serve the purposes to which moral philosophers have traditionally tried to put them. I want to raise the possibility that persons’ experiences of morality vary in a way that greatly limits the extent to which moral phenomenology can constitute a reason to favor one moral theory over another.

My suspicion is that phenomenology cannot serve as a pre-theoretic starting point or anchor in the consideration of rival moral theories because moral phenomenology is itself theory-laden. 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. But I will not be able to do more than gesture toward this “theory-ladenness of moral phenomenology” point here. My main goal will be to challenge the idea that there exists a moral phenomenology that is as robust and universal as many philosophers have traditionally thought.

In the first section, I will explain the historical method I will use to raise this challenge. In the second section, I will outline a particular phenomenological issue I will address in more detail – namely, whether the experience of morality includes the experience of normative authority. In the third section, I will describe Kierkegaard’s account of the normatively authoritative. In the fourth section, I will describe Clarke and Cudworth’s different account of the normatively authoritative. In the fifth section, I will use these differences between Clarke and Cudworth, on the one hand, and Kierkegaard, on the other, as a case study of the variability of moral phenomenology. And in the sixth section, I will briefly describe another line of inquiry – i.e., the differences between the rationalists’ and sentimentalists’ accounts of the experience of morality – that might also pose problems for the idea of a universal, robust moral phenomenology.

Methodology

The first issue I want to address is a methodological one. This issue can be framed by noting the shortcomings of two approaches to moral phenomenology: the questionnaire and introspection.

The questionnaire approach would have us develop a phenomenological account by asking a large, representative sample of ordinary people questions about their experiences of morality. If, for instance, we were trying to determine whether an objectivist or subjectivist account better captures the phenomenology of morality, the

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questionnaire approach might have us ask questions such as: do your moral obligations seem to you to be based on something outside yourself or on something internal? Or: when you think about whether you are morally obligated to do something, does it seem to you more like thinking about how to solve a mathematical or scientific problem, or more like thinking about whether or not you should use a particular shade of green when painting a wall or a landscape? Now I expect that if we were to put these kinds of questions to a large number of people, their responses would exhibit quite a bit of variation. But I doubt that those who believe in a robust universal moral phenomenology would take these findings to be a serious challenge. Robust universal phenomenologists would probably contend that the variation in answers is due to the simplistic nature of the questions, to the respondents’ not fully understanding the questions, or to the respondents’ responding in an unreflective, slapdash manner.

Robust universal phenomenologists will probably find the introspective approach more amenable. This approach holds that the best method for determining and articulating the essential features of moral experience is to attend as closely as possible to one’s own experience and then to do the very best job one can of describing that experience accurately. The problem with this approach is that it can beg the question of whether there are robust, universal features of the experience of morality. For while one person engaged in introspection may be able to develop a rich, nuanced, and accurate account of her own experience, introspection alone will not tell her whether other people experience morality in the same way. Of course, if we assume that morality is the sort of thing that everyone experiences in the same way – if we assume that there is a robust universal moral phenomenology – then the introspective approach will be legitimate. But that assumption is just what we are questioning here. The introspective approach is especially problematic if we take seriously the possibility that experiences of morality are theory-laden, or infected by persons’ prior beliefs about the origin or nature of morality. For someone who engages in deep, sustained introspection on what it is like to experience morality – i.e., someone who does the sort of thing that is indicative of a deep involvement with moral philosophy – is likely to be someone for whom theoretical considerations are particularly salient. And so such a person is likely to be particularly ill-positioned to discern, through introspection alone, the extent of the pre-theoretic features of everyone’s experience of morality.

Of course the questionnaire and introspective approaches as I’ve just described them are extreme or caricatured methodologies. Perhaps we can modify one or the other in a way that overcomes the shortcomings I’ve mentioned. We might, for instance, put the questionnaire to people who are not completely untutored in the philosophical issues under discussion. Or we might take care to submit our own introspections to the consideration of other careful introspectors before settling on a phenomenological description. But however that may be, rather than work in from either the questionnaire or introspective side, I will use a different approach, one that I hope will combine the best elements of both without being afflicted by either’s problems.

What I will do is examine moral phenomenology through works in the history of philosophy. Works in the history of philosophy are not afflicted by the problems I raised above for the questionnaire, for whatever else we may think about them, these
works clearly do reflect the careful, thoughtful consideration of individuals who have paid keen attention to their experiences of morality. Moreover, if we examine works by philosophers with different theoretical commitments, we may be able to gain some purchase on the question of the extent to which experiences of morality share some universal phenomenological features. The historical approach to moral phenomenology may serve as a kind of survey of introspections – as a questionnaire that has as its respondents some of the great moral philosophers.

**Normative authority**

The issue I want to apply the historical method to is whether the experience of morality essentially involves the experience of normative authority. In this section, I will give a general sense of this topic, using the work of Butler to help fix ideas. In the next two sections, I will examine more closely what Kierkegaard, Clarke, and Cudworth had to say about this matter.

Most of us at some point have come to the conclusion that there is something that we must do. Most of us have, at one time or another, come to think that there’s a course of action we simply do not have any choice but to perform. I take it that this is what Martin Luther was trying to describe when, in refusing to recant his criticisms of the Catholic Church, he said, “Here I stand, I can do no other”; and that Sophocles was trying to evoke the same experience when he had Antigone say, after stating her intention to bury her brother despite the edict forbidding it, “False to him will I never be found”; and that Will Kane (the Gary Cooper character in *High Noon*) was experiencing the same thing when, after explaining his decision to stay in town and fight the outlaws, he said, “I’ve got to, that’s the whole thing.”

Let us call this experience of a practical consideration’s presenting itself to us as something that we must or have to do the experience of “normative authority.” To think a consideration is normatively authoritative is to think that it constitutes a reason to act that overrides any reason to act in a contrary way. It is to think that the consideration is not just very important but of decisive, final, or ultimate importance. To think a consideration in favor of acting a certain way possesses normative authority is sufficient for thinking that one is justified in acting that way and unjustified in not acting that way.

Joseph Butler was very impressed by this experience of normative authority, discussing it at various points in his sermons. He held that practical considerations that possess normative authority come from conscience, and he equated the deliverances of conscience with morality (Butler 1983/1726, pp. 14–17 and pp. 69–70). Butler’s account of the authority of conscience, moreover, was based on, or at least implicated, phenomenological claims. He said that “authority and obligation” are a “constituent part of” a deliverance of conscience, and a natural way to interpret this statement is as claiming that our experience of conscience includes the experience of authority and obligation (Butler 1983/1726, p. 18). The same

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2 We can also call this the experience of “practical necessity” or, as Horgan and Timmons do, the “felt importance” of morality (Horgan and Timmons 2005, p. 70). For penetrating discussions of this experience, see Frankfurt (1988) and Williams (1981).
interpretation fits Butler’s claim that inward observation has revealed that moral perceptions differ from non-moral perceptions “not in degree, but in kind: and the reflecting upon each of them, as they thus stood in their nature, wrought a full intuitive conviction, that more was due and of right belonged to one of these inward perceptions, than to the other; that it demanded in all cases to govern such a creature as man” (Butler 1983/1726, p. 15). The authority of morality is something we grasp intuitively. The difference “in kind” between moral perceptions and non-moral perceptions is something we become aware of through reflecting on each of them. Our experience of morality includes a special kind of supremacy that our experience of other practical considerations does not. Or as Butler puts it elsewhere, “For the natural authority of the principle of reflection is an obligation the most near and intimate, the most certain and known…. Take in then that authority and obligation, which is a constituent part of [the principle of reflection], and it will undeniably follow, though a man should doubt of every thing else, yet, that he would still remain under the nearest and most certain obligation to the practice of virtue” (Butler 1983/1726, pp. 17–18). Butler is not claiming here that everyone’s beliefs about what he ought to do are infallible. He is claiming, rather, that we cannot be mistaken about the practical role conscience is supposed to play. What morality requires may not always be “certain and known,” but what is certain and known is that the requirements of morality are authoritative. And this is because we cannot think that something is required by morality without also thinking that it is an overriding or decisive reason for action. The experience of morality is phenomenologically inseparable from the experience of normative authority.

Or so Butler says. But in Fear and Trembling, Søren Kierkegaard denies just this phenomenological claim.

Kierkegaard on normative authority

The subject of Fear and Trembling is the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. As Kierkegaard interprets the story, Abraham’s “ethical obligation” was not to kill Isaac, but his duty to God was to kill Isaac (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 28). Faith demanded of Abraham something that was in flat “contradiction” with the ethical (Kierkegaard 30). The former asked Abraham to do what the latter “would forbid” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 74). But in this case, according to Kierkegaard, the ethical did not have normative authority. Faith overrode ethics. Abraham “transgressed the ethical,” he forwent “moral virtue,” but he was right to do so (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 59 and p. 99). For “the ethical [was] not the highest” duty. In Abraham’s case, there was “a teleological suspension of the ethical” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 56).

What does Kierkegaard’s telling of Abraham’s story have to do with phenomenology? Quite a lot, I think. For a great deal of Fear and Trembling consists of an exploration of Abraham’s internal experience – of what it was like for him to decide to sacrifice Isaac. And while Kierkegaard often insists that there is something “incomprehensible” about Abraham (a point to which we will return below), he is also perfectly clear in claiming that Abraham experienced the duty to sacrifice Isaac as something that had practical supremacy over the ethical. So while
Butler claims that when we experience a demand as ethical we experience it as normatively authoritative, Kierkegaard claims that Abraham experiences the ethical as something that is normatively overridden by something else (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, pp. 21–22 and p. 78). At least on the face of things, we have here a clear case of conflicting accounts of the phenomenology of the experience of morality.

One might object, however, that the case of Abraham is too unusual to mark any significant departure from Butler’s account. Perhaps, if we accept the story as Kierkegaard tells it, Abraham does constitute a sort of counterexample to the Butlerian moral phenomenology. But Abraham’s case is unique, or darn close to it. To the vast majority of individuals, God does not issue direct personal commands to perform actions that directly violate the ethical. The vast majority of individuals either never experience God’s direct personal commands or experience those commands as themselves being ethical. And so (according to this objection) the phenomenology of the vast majority of individuals may still be just as Butler describes.

But this objection misses Kierkegaard’s central point. While Fear and Trembling uses the story of Abraham as its leading example, what the essay really is is a rumination on faith, an exploration of the distinguishing features of the truly religious person. And what Kierkegaard wants to claim is that a person of faith experiences her duty to God as a supreme practical command. A person with faith experiences something other than the ethical as normatively authoritative. The story of Abraham brings this feature into particularly stark relief. But this feature will characterize all people of real faith, whether or not their faith asks them to violate the ethical.

I think, moreover, that the kind of person Kierkegaard describes – the person who has the kind of phenomenology that Abraham is so useful in exemplifying – may not be at all atypical. Many people, I suspect, would agree with Kierkegaard that while ethical rules are very important and possess authority over many other considerations, religious faith is normatively more authoritative (most important or overriding) still. Perhaps such people would balk at saying that their faith demands that they violate the ethical, but their explanation for the lack of contradiction between ethics and faith would not be that the two things are identical, or that the latter is a subset of the former. Their explanation would be, rather, that ethics must always acquiesce to the demands of faith, just as a non-trump card will always be defeated by a trump.3

But now another objection may arise. Is it really perfectly clear that I have picked out a substantial difference between Butler and Kierkegaard rather than merely a verbal one? Might Butler be using ethical terms to pick out the normatively authoritative, whatever that may turn out to be, while Kierkegaard is using ethical terms to rigidly designate a specifically Kantian or Hegelian conception of duty? Butler is not committed to equating morality to what Kant or Hegel said it was. And

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3As Bernard Gert has said, “Many philosophers...define morality as that code of conduct which a person takes to be overriding. It is significant that such philosophers almost never discuss religion, for religion is just as plausibly regarded as providing a code of conduct that a person takes to be overriding or most important” (Gert 1998, p. 10).
so (according to this objection) there is no reason we cannot take what Kierkegaard calls a duty to God to be just the kind of thing that Butler calls an ethical duty or a deliverance of conscience.

In order to answer this objection, I would need to present a full account of Butlerian conscience and morality and show that they possess features that make it impossible to assimilate them to Kierkegaardian faith. But the truth is that Butler was not perfectly explicit or univocal about what features, distinct from normative authority, conscience and morality possess. And to try to tease out of Butler’s texts a fully developed picture of his conception of conscience and morality would require more exegesis and interpolation than it is appropriate to engage in here. I think, however, that the challenge to universal, robust moral phenomenology can be posed just as well, and more quickly, by bringing into the discussion two other moral philosophers: Samuel Clarke and Ralph Cudworth.

**Clarke and Cudworth on normative authority**

Like Butler, Clarke and Cudworth thought that the ethical possessed normative authority. They thought that if a practical consideration was ethically required, it had a trumping practical supremacy over any other type of consideration. But it’s clear that Clarke and Cudworth took the ethical to be something that is incompatible with Kierkegaardian faith. We can begin to get a view of this incompatibility by noting a point on which Kierkegaard, Clarke, and Cudworth all agreed. All three of them thought that the ethical was intelligible, comprehensible, understandable. Persons who act for ethical reasons, according to Kierkegaard, Clarke, and Cudworth, act for reasons that are explicable. Ethical justification can be publicly articulated.

Clarke’s belief in the intelligibility of ethics is apparent from the comparison he draws between ethics and geometry. The “assent” we give to fundamental ethical principles, Clarke claims, is crucially similar to the assent we give to “geometrical Truth” (Clarke 1738, p. 615). In both cases, that to which we give assent is self-evident to us, something that we fully understand must be true. As Clarke puts it, “For a Man endued with Reason, to deny the Truth of [a fundamental ethical principle] is the very same thing...as if a Man that understands Geometry or Arithmetick, should deny the most obvious and known Proportions of Lines or Numbers, and perversely contend that the Whole is not equal to all its parts, or that a Square is not double to a

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4Here are some examples of Clarke’s fundamental moral principles: “[I]n Mens dealing and conversing one with another; ‘tis undeniably more Fit, absolutely and in the Nature of the thing itself, that all Men should endeavour to promote the universal good and welfare of All; than that all Men should be continually contriving the ruin and destruction of All. ‘Tis evidently more Fit, even before all positive Bargains and Compacts, that Men should deal one with another according to the known Rules of Justice and Equity; than that every Man for his own present Advantage, should without scruple disappoint the most reasonable and equitable Expectations of his Neighbours, and cheat and defraud, or spoil by violence, all others without restraint. Lastly, ‘tis without dispute more Fit and reasonable in itself, that I should preserve the Life of an innocent Man, that happens at any time to be in my Power; or deliver him from any imminent danger, tho’ I have never made any promise so to do; than that I should suffer him to perish, or take away his Life, without any reason or provocation at all” (Clarke 1738, p. 609).

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triangle of equal base and height” (Clarke 1738, p. 609). According to Clarke, we grasp ethics through rational thought. Our comprehension of ethics has the same character as our comprehension of Euclid’s first principles.

Cudworth relied on the comparison between ethics and geometry just as much as Clarke, if not more so. Indeed, great swaths of Cudworth’s *Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality* are given over to discussion of geometrical theorems, which Cudworth deemed appropriate for a book with that title because he believed that whatever epistemological and metaphysical implications he could establish about geometry he could also apply to ethics.\(^5\) And for Cudworth, as for Clarke, the crucial point of similarity between ethics and geometry was that both are self-evident to us, such that we fully understand why they must be true. Cudworth makes it clear, moreover, that because geometry and ethics are intelligible to every rational being, they are matters about which all people can “confer and discourse together... presently perceiving one another’s meaning, and having the very same conceptions of things in their mind” (Cudworth 1996/1731, p. 131). Ethics and geometry are subjects one person can “readily teach, and another [person] learn.”

Now as I already mentioned, Kierkegaard would have agreed with Clarke and Cudworth’s characterization of the ethical. Kierkegaard may not have endorsed every aspect of the comparison between ethics and geometry. But like Clarke and Cudworth, Kierkegaard thought that ethical duties were comprehensible or intelligible. The ethical, Kierkegaard says, is “understandable by all” or “public,” something people can explain to each other (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 92). Ethical undertakings are out in the open” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 88). Their justification is something that can be readily “disclosed” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, pp. 82, 87, 88, and 113).

Crucially, however, Kierkegaard thought that what presents itself to us (or to persons of faith, anyway) as normatively authoritative is unintelligible and incomprehensible, something that we cannot explain or justify to others. This view of Kierkegaard’s is apparent from his repeated claims of the unbridgeable distance between the comprehensibility of a person who acts for ethical reasons and the incomprehensibility of Abraham. The ethical is “understandable by all,” but faith is a matter “no one can understand” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 113). Faith is a “paradox,” and the person who acts on faith acts for reasons that are essentially “private,” “hidden” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 93 and p.113). Abraham cannot disclose or explain why he does what he does. He “cannot speak” in a way that will justify his conduct to others; he cannot make his actions “understandable” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 115). Abraham’s conduct is something “no thought can grasp.” He acts “by virtue of the absurd” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, pp. 53, 115, and 119). For Kierkegaard, as for Clarke and Cudworth, the ethical is a matter of rational thought. But unlike Clarke and Cudworth, Kierkegaard maintains that faith trumps the ethical and that “faith begins precisely where thought stops” (Kierkegaard 2006/1843, p. 53). Like Butler, Clarke and Cudworth hold that the experience of

\(^5\) For fuller discussion of Cudworth’s use of the analogy between morals and geometry, see Gill (2004).
morality essentially involves the experience of normative authority, but Kierkegaard
denies that morality always presents itself to us as normatively authoritative.
According to Kierkegaard, normative authority sometimes attaches to the experience
of a non-moral consideration.

One way to see that this difference is substantive and not merely verbal is to
attend to Clarke’s views of our duties to God. Clarke thinks that our duties to God
are just as intelligible as our duties to other humans and to ourselves. He thinks that
we comprehend our duties to God, as we comprehend our other ethical duties,
through the same rational faculty through which we comprehend geometry. Indeed,
Clarke uses our duty to God – what he takes to be the self-evidence and fittingness
that we (inferior beings) worship, obey, and imitate God (an infinitely superior
being) – as a leading example in his comparison of practical obligation to geometry.
He writes,

That there are Differences of things; and different Relations, Respects or
Proportions, of some things towards others; is as evident and undeniable, as
that one magnitude or number, is greater, equal to, or smaller than another. That
from these different Relations of different things, there necessarily arises an
agreement or disagreement of some things with others, or a fitness or unfitness
of the application of different things or different relations one to another; is
likewise as plain, as that there is any such thing as Proportion or Disproportion
in Geometry and Arithmetick, or Uniformity or Difformity in comparing
together the respective Figures of Bodies... Also that from the different
relations of different Persons one to another, there necessarily arises a fitness or
unfitness of certain manners of Behaviour of some persons towards others: Is as
manifest as that the Properties which flow from the Essences of different
mathematical Figures, have different congruities or incongruities between
themselves... For instance: That God is infinitely superior to Men; is as clear, as
that Infinity is larger than a Point, or Eternity longer than a Moment. And ‘tis as
certainly Fit, that Men should honour and worship, obey and imitate God,
rather than on the contrary in all their Actions indeavour to dishonour and
disobey him; as ‘tis certainly True, that they have an entire dependence on
Him.... (Clarke 1738, p. 608)

Clarke agrees with Kierkegaard that we experience our duties to God – just as we
experience our other ethical duties – as possessing normative authority. But Clarke
claims that essentially involved in that experience is an understanding of what we
owe to God – as well as an understanding of our other ethical duties – that is the
same as the understanding we have of the basics of geometry and arithmetic, while
Kierkegaard claims that essentially involved in that experience is a non-rational
acceptance of a practically overriding consideration that defies rational thought. And
this difference about what we experience as normatively authoritative is substantive,
not merely verbal.

Moreover, these phenomenological differences track differences between theo-
retical commitments of Cudworth and Clarke, on the one hand, and Kierkegaard, on
the other, as I will explain in the next section.
Why might Clarke and Cudworth’s phenomenology differ from Kierkegaard’s?

Fundamental for Clarke and Cudworth was the notion, central to some strands of Christianity, that humans were made in the image of God.6 Closely connected to this notion was their belief in a limited but nonetheless real similarity between human minds and the mind of God – or the isomorphism of rationality in all its instantiations. This belief in the similarity between human and divine rationality went hand in hand with the idea that humans are capable of attaining an understanding of some things that is the same as the understanding that God possesses. Now of course God understands everything perfectly. But it turns out, according to Clarke and Cudworth, that we understand some things perfectly as well. The prime example of such understanding is geometry. We comprehend not merely that certain geometric principles are true but also that they must be true. Our understanding of the basics of geometry is so full and decisive that God Himself could not improve on it. Clarke and Cudworth were greatly impressed by this feature of geometric understanding, and it’s at least part of what led them to use geometry as their paradigm for knowledge in general. They maintained that any belief that did not attain geometric-like certainty – any belief that was such that we did not have a full and decisive understanding of why it had to be true – would not qualify as knowledge at all. So if our ethical ideas were to count as knowledge – if our ethical ideas were going to be such that we could trust them to tell us accurately what to do – we would have to experience them as being as certain and necessary as geometry. Clarke and Cudworth were sure, moreover, that such ethical understanding is possible, since God is perfectly ethical, which implies that God has ethical ideas, which in turn implies that God has a full and decisive (geometric-like) understanding of ethics. Now the fact that our ethical ideas have to possess geometric-like certainty and necessity in order for us to have full confidence in them does not on its own imply that our ethical ideas do possess geometric-like certainty and necessity. It is possible both to subscribe to a geometric model of knowledge and to claim that our ethical ideas fail to live up to that model. This would be to hold a kind of error theory of ethics, according to which we lack conclusive or certain reasons for thinking that our ethical ideas accurately inform us of what we ought to do. It would be to hold that we lack conclusive or certain reasons for thinking, for instance, that it’s better to promote the welfare of all rather than to contrive the ruin and destruction of all, or that it’s better to preserve the life of an innocent man rather than kill him without any reason or provocation, or that we ought to honor and worship God. But it’s hard to imagine Clarke and Cudworth adopting an error theory of this sort. It’s hard to imagine their allowing that we do not have unimpeachable reasons to promote the welfare of all, to preserve the life of an innocent man, and to honor and worship God. Indeed, one of the main impetuses for their philosophical thought as a whole was their determination to defeat what they took to be the error theory of Hobbes. But on the assumption of Clarke and Cudworth’s geometric model of knowledge, our ethical ideas will be vindicated only if our assent to basic ethical

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6 For fuller discussion of the points raised in this paragraph, see Craig (1987), as well as Gill (2006a).
principles has the same character as our assent to basic geometric principles. Clarke and Cudworth’s rationalist phenomenological claim was thus required by their primary ethical goal of establishing that we have unimpeachable reasons to promote the welfare of all, to preserve the life of an innocent man, and to honor and worship God, and by their epistemology, which was itself embedded in their deepest theological and religious commitments.

Fundamental to Kierkegaard, in contrast, was the notion, central to other strands of Christianity (including the Pietism of Kierkegaard’s upbringing), that humans are fallen creatures – creatures who, through sin, have ruined their original, God-given nature. This stress on original sin goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the ineluctable difference between humans and God. On this way of thinking, it should come as no surprise that God’s reasons are unintelligible to us, for He is perfect and we are profoundly imperfect. We should not expect to understand God’s commands because the corruption of our faculty of understanding prevents us from attaining a Godly mental state. Kierkegaard’s religious and theological views thus imply that human thought is inadequate to the job of fully understanding what God tells us. And thus we find that Kierkegaard’s a-rationalist phenomenological claim is as firmly embedded in his theological and religious commitments as Clarke and Cudworth’s rationalist phenomenological claim is embedded in theirs.

So the phenomenological differences between Clarke and Cudworth, on the one hand, and Kierkegaard, on the other, track differences in their theoretical views of God and human nature. What’s the best explanation for this? There are at least two explanatory lines we might pursue. One line starts from phenomenology and moves toward theory, the other starts from theory and moves toward phenomenology.

According to the first line, Clarke and Cudworth had certain rationalist experiences early on and in a way that cannot be well explained by their holding any prior theoretical commitments. They then adopted or constructed the rationalist theories they ended up holding because such theories accorded with those prior experiences. Meanwhile, Kierkegaard had certain a-rationalist experiences early on, and he then adopted or constructed the theory he ended up holding because it accorded with his prior experiences.

According to the second line, Clarke and Cudworth’s rationalist experiences and Kierkegaard’s a-rationalist experiences can best be explained as the result of their holding prior theoretical commitments concerning ethics, human nature, and God. That is not to say that they didn’t have the relevant experiences until after they had fully developed their large-scale theories. They might very well have been conscious of experiencing ethics or the word of God in certain ways well before they started their philosophical writing careers. But, according to this second explanatory line, these experiences are nonetheless best explained as resulting from their early exposure to ideas, ideologies, or doctrines – the kind of exposure typical from school, church, and family.

As I mentioned earlier, I suspect that the second explanatory line is more likely. But I’m not sure how to make that case here. For the purpose of raising doubt about the existence of a universal, robust moral phenomenology, however, the difference between these two explanatory lines does not matter too much. What is most important is to make plausible the idea that people experience morality – and normative authority – in different ways (e.g., some experience it as essentially
normatively authoritative, and some do not), and that these differences militate against using phenomenology as a pre-theoretic fixed point that can be used as a neutral arbiter between rival philosophical theories about whether morality is normatively authoritative. My goal has been to make vivid the possibility that phenomenology and theory may come bundled together as a package deal – that phenomenology cannot claim methodological priority.

There is, however, a third line one could take on the differences between Clarke, Cudworth, and Kierkegaard. According to this third line, there is, for all I’ve said, still no reason to doubt that Clarke, Cudworth, and Kierkegaard experienced morality in crucially similar ways. I’ve focused on certain differences, but underlying them might lie similarities that are robust enough to serve as pre-theoretic anchors or arbiters.

In response, let me say that I concede that there may very well be some common elements of the phenomenology of Clarke, Cudworth, and Kierkegaard that would be useful in mapping out the terrain of all the things that we use moral or more broadly normative language to talk about. What I doubt is that we will be able to find in phenomenology alone any reason to opt for one side or another of the perennially interesting philosophical questions about morality – such as whether morality is normatively authoritative or whether morality is fully rationally intelligible. On questions such as these – the kinds of questions, for instance, that separate Clarke and Cudworth from Kierkegaard – phenomenological investigation will simply not find traction. And that’s because the phenomenology of one person (e.g., Clarke or Cudworth) will turn out to be consistent with one answer while the phenomenology of another person (e.g., Kierkegaard) will turn out to be consistent with another.

I acknowledge, however, that many more examples (I’ve only presented one, after all!!) would be needed in order to make really convincing the idea that moral phenomenology varies in a way that makes it unsuitable to serve much if any function in the adjudication of philosophical disputes about morality. So in my final section, let me outline another line of inquiry we might pursue – an inquiry into the phenomenological differences between moral rationalists and moral sentimentalists – if we were to continue to use the historical approach to try to establish moral phenomenology’s variability.

**Sentimentalist vs rationalist moral phenomenology**

Moral sentimentalists of the eighteenth century did not subscribe to an a-rationalism that was as strong as Kierkegaard’s. But they were like Kierkegaard in thinking that our normative experiences were not nearly as intelligible as Clarke and Cudworth had claimed.

The rationalists, as we’ve seen, maintained that our experience of morality is crucially similar to our experience of geometry. Both experiences, according to the rationalists, are characterized by the same kind of certainty, self-evidence, and awareness of necessity. The sentimentalists maintained, in contrast, that our experience of morality has an essentially affective character that sharply distinguishes it from our experience of geometry. Each side contended, moreover, that
every ordinary person – anyone who has not been infected by philosophy – will immediately agree with the correctness of its own phenomenological description.

Here is a representative passage in which Clarke both describes his phenomenology and asserts that all normal people will agree with him:

Now that the Case is truly thus; that the eternal differences of Good and Evil, the unalterable Rule of Right and Equity, do necessarily and unavoidably determine the Judgement, and force the Assent of all Men that use any Consideration; is undeniably manifest from the universal Experience of Mankind. (Clarke 1738, p. 615)

And again:

For a Man endued with Reason, to deny the Truth of [fundamental moral principles] is the very same thing...as if a Man that understands Geometry or Arithmetick, should deny the most obvious and known Proportions of Lines or Numbers, and perversely contend that the Whole is not equal to all its parts, or that a Square is not double to a triangle of equal base and height. Any Man of ordinary capacity, and unbyassed judgment, plainness and simplicity; who had never read, and had never been told, that there were Men and Philosophers, who had in earnest asserted and attempted to prove, that there is no natural and unalterable difference between Good and Evil; would at the first hearing be as hardly persuaded to believe, that it could ever really enter into the Heart of any intelligent Man, to deny all natural difference between Right and Wrong; as he would be to believe, that ever there could be any Geometer who would seriously and in good earnest lay it down as a first Principle, that a crooked Line is as straight as a right one. (Clarke 1738, p. 609)

And here is a representative passage in which Hutcheson denies exactly the phenomenological claim Clarke has made:

[When we approve of a kind beneficent action let us consider whether this feeling, or action, or modification of the soul, more resembles an act of contemplation, such as this, ‘When straight lines intersect each other, the vertical angles are equal,’ or that liking we have to a beautiful form, an harmonious composition, a grateful sound. (Hutcheson 2002/1728, p. 136)

Hutcheson does not bother to answer this question. He means it to be rhetorical. He thinks it will be obvious to everyone that her moral approvals “more resemble” what she experiences when she “likes” something than what she experiences when she comprehends a geometric theorem. In numerous other passages, moreover, Hutcheson makes it clear that he believes that anyone who introspects will quickly realize that her moral judgment is based on a positive affective response. When people “consult their own Breasts,” he says, it will be “universally acknowledg’d” that to apprehend “Moral Goodness” is to feel a kind of “Love toward the Actor” (Hutcheson 2004/1725, p. 85). “Would Men reflect upon what they feel in themselves, all Proofs [that we have a moral Sense] would be needless” (Hutcheson 2002/1728, p. 5; cf. p. 205). And “we need little Reasoning, or Argument [to
establish that moral perceptions are sensory], since Certainty is only attainable by distinct Attention to what we are conscious happens in our Minds” (Hutcheson 2002/1728, p. 15; cf. pp. 16–17).

The difference between Clarke and Hutcheson’s moral phenomenologies also stands out clearly when we consider the analogies that played leading roles in their philosophical expositions. As we’ve seen, the leading analogy in Clarke (and Cudworth) was between morals and geometry. But the leading analogy in Hutcheson (and in Shaftesbury and Hume) was between morals and beauty. Indeed, the very title of Hutcheson’s first published work – An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue – indicates his intention to give parallel accounts of beauty and morality. And the crucial point of similarity on which he built this analogy was that moral and aesthetic experiences are both sensible – i.e., that both experiences have an affective character that makes them like our experiences of color, taste, and sound and unlike our rational apprehension of geometry. (I discuss the sentimentalists’ beauty-morality analogy and contrast it with the rationalists’ geometry-morality analogy in Gill (2006b)).

Another way of putting the difference between Clarke and Hutcheson’s moral phenomenologies is in terms of fittingness. As we’ve seen, the rationalists claimed that we experience moral considerations as having a kind of fit to situations that is the same as the kind of fit that solutions have to mathematical problems. Hutcheson ridiculed the rationalists’ concept of fittingness (Hutcheson 2002/1728, pp. 155–160). He argued that the rationalists’ use of this concept is hopelessly confused and utterly ineffective. But he did not completely reject the idea that we experience what is moral as fitting. He allowed that judging that something is moral can be described in terms of fittingness. But he claimed that the judgment in question is not like the experience of comprehending the truth of a geometric theorem but is rather like the experience of feeling love or pleasure. As Hutcheson put it, the “one Meaning” of “Fitness” that is relevant to the discussion of morals is that “‘certain Affections or Actions of an Agent, standing in a certain Relation to other Agents, is approved by every Observer, or raises in him a grateful Perception, or moves the Observer to love the Agent.’ This Meaning is the same with the Notion of pleasing a moral Sense” (Hutcheson 2002/1728, p. 160).

So Hutcheson was willing to allow that there is a sense in which we experience the moral as “fitting.” But his description of what that experience is like was very different from what rationalists such as Cudworth and Clarke took that experience to be. As Cudworth and Clarke described it, the experience constituted powerful evidence for their rationalist account of the origin of morality. As Hutcheson described it, the experience constituted powerful evidence for his sentimentalist account. It seems possible, then, that the only conclusion we might be able to draw is that there is no theoretically neutral phenomenology of fittingness that will be of any help in the adjudication of the dispute between rationalists and sentimentalists.7

7Things may look even worse for a universal, robust phenomenology if we bring Kierkegaard back into the mix. For Kierkegaard, it seems to me, would deny that the word of God that is experienced as normatively authoritative “fits” the situation at all. Kierkegaard’s telling of the story of Abraham implies that faith might demand we do something that contradicts what seems to us to be fitting.
Conclusion

I have identified claims about moral phenomenology in several important works of moral philosophy. I have tried to show that the philosophers’ disagreements about moral phenomenology track their theoretical disagreements about the nature or origin of morality. I have raised the possibility that this tracking occurs because persons’ experiences of morality are infected by their theoretical commitments. And I have maintained that the historical examples constitute evidence that moral phenomenology will be of little or no use in adjudicating between philosophical disputes such as whether morality is normatively authoritative and whether morality originates in reason alone.

The historical examples I’ve presented do not constitute anything like a conclusive case for the view that moral phenomenology is ineluctably value-laden. But if the historical method is a legitimate approach to this subject, then these examples do give us at least prima facie reason to doubt that moral phenomenology will ever be able to cut much philosophical ice.

References