Gestalt Shifts in Moral Perception

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Moral philosophers often assume that there are clear and unambiguous single descriptions of particular moral situations, and thus they view their primary task as that of determining the most moral action to take when in these situations. But surely there is less chance of there being a single and final way to describe a given moral situation than there is of there being a single and final way to organize and describe a visual display. Although we perceive many of our day-to-day moral experiences in an unreflective and even reflexive manner, it is also possible for us to (and we often do) "reperceive" moral situations. On one end of the spectrum, we can slightly adjust our original perceptions by attending to details of moral significance that were at first unnoticed. Or on the other end of the spectrum, we can dramatically shift from our original perceptions to very different moral perspectives or frameworks.

I argue in this chapter that gestalt shifts play a significant role in the mental processes used to determine the moral saliencies of particular situations. I build on the recent debate between Carol Gilligan and Owen Flanagan over the relevance of the gestalt-shift metaphor to the organization and reorganization of our moral perceptions (Gilligan 1987; Flanagan and Jackson 1990; Gilligan and Attanucci 1988; and Flanagan 1991). Throughout the course of this debate, neither of them directly referred to important related issues found in philosophical and psychological discussions of perception. I propose to place this debate within that broader context and argue that a discussion of gestalt shifts in moral perception is directly linked to the more general consideration of how it is that we abstract from and draw meaning out of situations! Connectionist models of cognition, along with research on the role of tasks, metaphors, and analogies in perceptual mental processes, help answer the question, To what degree and under what conditions do we experience gestalt shifts in the organization of our moral perceptions?

Before continuing, it may be helpful to consider a specific example of a gestalt shift in moral perception. Stephen R. Covey provides a dramatic account of "re-seeing" moral saliencies in his best-seller, *The Seven Habits of*
Highly Effective People. Although the description is rather extended, I include most of it. His setting of the scene and his description of how he reframed the situation will be useful for further discussion and analysis:

I [Covey] remember a mini-paradigm shift I experienced one Sunday morning on a subway in New York. People were sitting quietly—some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people’s papers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?”

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”

... Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently [Covey’s emphasis]. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behavior; my heart was filled with the man’s pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely.... Everything changed in an instant. (Covey 1989, 30–31)

Note that Covey refers to this experience as a “mini-paradigm shift.” Any discussion of gestalt shifts in moral perception will certainly overlap with recent discussions of “paradigm shifts” in scientific theories.1 However, I refer to a shift in the organizing of a particular moral situation as a gestalt shift to emphasize that not all shifts are as incommensurable as Kuhn’s paradigm shifts.

Some might argue that shifts in moral perception are few and far between, but I argue that gestalt shifts, are common and unavoidable, and they play a significant role in the mental processes used to perceive particular moral situations. More specifically, I argue that gestalt shifts range
from shifts between "unmergeable" or "rival" details of a perceived situation to shifts between entire organizing perspectives of a situation; and these shifts play a significant role in the mental processes used to determine the moral saliencies of particular situations. I differentiate between our more unreflective day-to-day moral perceptions (which incorporate what I term framework shifts as a result of switching tasks) and our more deliberative moral "perceptions" (which include both framework shifts and what I term component shifts).

Gilligan: Shifts between Care and Justice Perspectives

Carol Gilligan, a moral psychologist, has focused much of her work on differences in moral reasoning between male and female research participants. In her early studies, subjects were presented with short descriptions of hypothetical dilemmas and then asked to reason morally about these dilemmas. More recently, Gilligan has asked her subjects (both male and female) to supply and describe their own examples of moral dilemmas. She switched to soliciting real-life moral dilemmas in order to discover which experiences the subjects themselves most viewed as moral dilemmas. As a result of this work, Gilligan offers the following psychological moral theory:

1) Concerns about justice and care are both represented in people's thinking about real-life moral dilemmas, but people tend to focus on one set of concerns and minimally represent the other; and 2) there is an association between moral orientation and gender such that both men and women use both orientations, but Care Focus dilemmas are more likely to be presented by women and Justice Focus dilemmas by men. (Gilligan and Attanucci 1988, 88)

Gilligan views unfairness-fairness and inequality-equality as those saliencies most associated with the justice perspective, and attachment-detachment and responsibility-irresponsibility as those saliencies most associated with the care perspective (Gilligan 1987, 20). In the passage above, Gilligan acknowledges that the same person may be able to organize moral experiences from either the justice or the care perspective, but she argues that one perspective predominates. When we do view a particular situation using both perspectives, Gilligan maintains that we shift between perspectives rather than organize that particular experience by at once combining justice and care concerns.

I will not discuss the degree to which justice, or care, or both predominate in men's and women's overall moral orientations. Rather, I will describe Gilligan's views on shifts. Gilligan compares the shift between justice and care perspectives to visual gestalt shifts that take place when viewing ambiguous figures. She writes:
Like the figure-ground shift in ambiguous figure perception, justice and care as moral perspectives are not opposites or mirror-images of one another, with justice uncaring and care unjust. Instead, these perspectives denote different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them. (Gilligan 1987, 22)

Although admitting that more research needs to be done on "whether, for example, people alternate perspectives, like seeing the rabbit and the duck in the rabbit-duck figure, or integrate the two perspectives in a way that resolves or sustains ambiguity" (Gilligan 1987, 26), she does argue that we vacillate between rather than integrate the justice and care perspectives. She refers to the "focus phenomenon," whereby subjects lose sight of one group of potential saliencies (justice saliencies) and focus instead on another group (care saliencies) in moral perception.

Gilligan's evidence for the contention that we shift between perspectives that are "not readily integratable" is garnered from research subjects' verbal descriptions of moral situations. Subjects were deemed to have switched perspectives when the terms they used in one analysis of the moral dilemma did not contain the terms of another analysis of the same dilemma. She refers to the doctoral research of Kay Johnston in which children and teenagers were presented with a moral dilemma in fable form. According to Johnston, about half the children "spontaneously switched moral orientations" (they switched terminology) when asked if there was another way to "solve the problem" (Gilligan 1987, 26–27).

It is worth noting that Gilligan leaves room for the possibility that there are more than two moral orientations when she refers to "at least two moral orientations" (Gilligan 1987, 26, my emphasis). She does not, however, conjecture on the nature or composition of any additional moral perspectives beyond care and justice.

Flanagan: Integrated Moral Perceptions

Owen Flanagan takes a more interdisciplinary approach to moral cognition and brings recent advances in cognitive science, moral theory, and psychology to bear on the issues surrounding moral perception. In his discussion of Gilligan's two perspectives, Flanagan primarily wishes to take issue with the degree to which persons have a dominant orientation, but he also objects to certain aspects of Gilligan's use of the gestalt-shift metaphor. He describes three ways in which the metaphor is helpful and even illuminating but follows this discussion with three ways in which it is "unhelpful and misleading" (Flanagan 1991, 214). His primary objections to the metaphor are: (1) "Not all moral issues are so open to alternative construals";
"Moral consideration, unlike visual perception, takes place over time and can involve weighing as much, and as messy, information as we like"; and (3) "The metaphor calls attention to the gross features of moral perception [but] much of what is most interesting and individually distinctive about moral personality lies in the small details of what is noticed, deliberated about, and acted on" (Flanagan 1991, 214–217).

In the following sections, I bring recent developments in cognitive science to this discussion of the role of gestalt shifts in organizing moral experience.

**Gestalt Shifts**

I do not limit the definition of a gestalt shift to examples of completely polar and/or incommensurable organizations. Rather I include any two mental organizations that cannot be merged into one (or are incompatible in some way), no matter how much these two organizations may have in common. Another way to put this is to use the visual focus metaphor. When one set of saliencies comes into focus, most members of that set (but not necessarily all) go out of focus when the competing set of saliencies comes into focus. The duck-rabbit image (figure 7.1) is a more extreme example of a visual image that can result in our experiencing two distinct and incompatible perceptions. When we see the duck, we do not see the rabbit; and after switching to seeing the rabbit, we do not see the duck. However, images with figure-ground ambiguities can also result in the experience of a gestalt shift (figure 7.2). In figure-ground shifts, there is

Figure 7.1
more of an emphasis on refocusing, where background becomes foreground and foreground becomes background, rather than an emphasis on incompatible and completely distinct figure interpretations. Gilligan and I define gestalt shifts as incorporating both incompatible figures and figure-ground ambiguities, whereas Flanagan emphasizes more the view that gestalt shifts (and thus gestalt shift metaphors) necessarily include a more radical figure incommensurability.

The experience of a gestalt shift in moral perception may or may not be provoked by an external stimulus. Just as it can be mentioned to someone “stuck” seeing only a rabbit that the image can also be seen as a duck (and the “bill” of the duck can even be directly pointed to), so can someone supply new information that encourages the reperceiving of a moral situation. Covey’s shift, for example, was preceded by new information from the man in the subway. But one could also imagine Covey’s reperceiving the situation with no external stimulus. For instance, he could have suddenly noticed that these children were behaving similarly to children he had observed previously at a parent’s funeral service.

When a shift in moral perception is preceded by an external stimulus, there is a sense in which the situation itself has changed. I wish to emphasize, however, that gestalt shifts can occur even when the “input” to a
perception changes to some degree. Gestalt shifts occur in such cases when the new piece of perceptual input is not simply added on or incorporated into the original perception; rather, at least some of the original perceptual input array is mentally reorganized.

It is also important to this discussion to distinguish between a framework gestalt shift and a component gestalt shift (hereafter referred to as framework shift and component shift). What I term a framework shift involves (1) a mental switch from one way of organizing an entire experience to a different way of organizing that experience and (2) some sense in which the two ways of organizing the experience are incompatible—in other words, the two overall organizations cannot be merged into a single overall organization. The duck-rabbit switch would be a framework shift if the duck-rabbit image filled our entire viewing screen as it were—if the duck-rabbit image comprised our perceptual experience.

On the other hand, what I term a component shift involves (1) a mental shift from one way of organizing a detail (component) of an experience to a different way of organizing that detail, and (2) some sense in which the two ways of organizing that detail of experience are incompatible. A visual example of a component shift is the shift that would occur when viewing the duck-rabbit image as part of a larger scene. For instance, we may see a person wearing a t-shirt with many patterns on it, one of which is the duck-rabbit pattern. The overall organization of the scene remains the same (a person wearing a t-shirt with patterns on it), but a detail in the scene shifts. For the purposes of this discussion, then, a gestalt shift occurs whenever the perceiver shifts between the deployment of one already-existing organizing mental structure to the deployment of another already-existing organizing structure in the perceiving of at least some (if not all) of a particular situation or experience.

Moral perceptions can involve either framework or component shifts. For example, we could continue to frame a particular woman’s abortion dilemma around the status of the fetus (rather than reorganizing the frame around the relationship of that woman to the fetus) but shift between viewing the fetus first as an unborn child and then as a simple growth. Such a shift would be a component shift in moral perception. With these clarifications in mind, let us move on to consider when and under what conditions gestalt shifts in moral perception are most likely to take place.

Tasks and Gestalt Shifts in Moral Perception

As we go about our daily lives, it only makes sense that our current tasks would heavily influence which of all possible perceptual organizations (possible for us with the learning history that each of us has) is actually brought online. If there is something we are trying to accomplish, we will
notice and abstract out those aspects of our experience that most help us to achieve our objective. Our days are filled with such tasks as fulfilling job requirements, running errands, getting x done, solving problem y, and so on.

Neither Gilligan nor Flanagan directly addresses the relationship between task switching and gestalt shifts in moral perception. In this section, I argue that in our more unreflective day-to-day moral perceptions, an important relationship exists between switching tasks and gestalt shifts in moral perception. The obvious result of acknowledging this relationship is the additional acknowledgment that there are many more gestalt shifts in our day-to-day moral perceptions than either Gilligan or Flanagan postulates and many of these shifts are between perceptual organizations other than the justice-care organizations.

An inherent difficulty in analyzing the relationship between perceptual organizations and tasks is that of determining the best level of description for particular tasks. A task can be described at any number of levels of generality or complexity. To keep this discussion of tasks simple, I describe someone as engaged in a particular task (mental or otherwise) if it makes sense that the person would describe herself as currently engaged in that task if asked (for example, “What are you doing right now?” “I’m trying to figure out what’s fair.”)

In *Varieties of Moral Personality*, Flanagan relates the perceptual process of abstracting out certain features of a situation to a person’s current task. He specifies two main types of abstraction: feature detection (or classificatory abstraction) and task-guided abstraction. These two main types of abstraction are not mutually exclusive mental processes but interact in complex ways. He defines feature detection as involving “the cognitive isolation or recognition of just those properties (sometimes called essential properties) which warrant classifying some token as a member of a type or kind” (83–84). He defines task-guided abstraction as the deployment of rationalized procedures that “warrant paying differential attention, and giving differential treatment, to various features of an object, event, or situation” in order to complete a given task successfully (85). All kinds of abstraction involve highlighting or separating out the features of some thing or event that bring it under the correct cognitive description relative to its actual nature and the aims of the person doing the abstracting. Task-guided abstraction goes further and involves deployment of rationalized procedures deemed appropriate to the successful completion of the task at hand. These procedures warrant paying differential attention, and giving differential treatment, to various features of an object, event, or situation. My point is this: to the degree that our perceptions are task guided, we will shift our perceptions and the organized saliencies of our
perceptions when we shift tasks. Thus, switches to significantly different tasks will often involve what I consider to be gestalt shifts in perception.

Of course, not all task switches precipitate shifts in moral perception. Since neither mowing my lawn nor raking the cuttings is likely to include the perception of any moral saliencies, it is highly unlikely that switching from mowing to raking will result in a gestalt shift in moral perception. So it is important at this point to examine what kinds of day-to-day tasks and task switches most affect moral perceptions. Clearly, switching between ostensibly “moral” tasks will be most likely to affect moral perceptions. For example, switching from the task of determining what is most fair to that of determining what is most caring may well result in our reorganizing our experience. Most of us are not engaged in self-described moral tasks much of the time. We may live by such high-level moral goals as that of responding morally when it is called for, but the specific task of responding morally may be initiated only intermittently in our day-to-day experience.

This is not to say that we do not make moral judgments and determine moral saliencies unless engaged in a self-described moral task. In fact, any task that includes interactions with others will often incorporate the making of moral judgments, assessments, or both. The most obvious day-to-day task likely to involve moral perceptions is our “job.” For instance, the moral qualities of those who most determine our job success will often be the qualities of most salience to us throughout our workday.

To illustrate, while engaged in solving a problem at work with a colleague, I am most likely to organize my perceptual experience around the obstacles and means to solving this work-related problem. If my colleague is preventing the project from proceeding, I view this colleague as “difficult” (at best), and all of her personality faults become highly salient in my experience. However, I may also have a high-level goal of treating others with compassion when they are “in need.” Even in the middle of an intense, work-related discussion, I may notice something out of sorts with my colleague, “interrupt” my foreground work-related task, and initiate my “treat others with compassion” moral task. As a result, I switch to reperceiving the saliencies in my colleague’s behavior most important to my responding with compassion. In this case, the shift in my moral perceptions is tied to my switching from an ostensibly “nonmoral” task (which nonetheless incorporates moral perceptions) to a “moral” task.

I can also switch, for example, from a more general moral task of attempting to determine the most fair thing to do in a situation to the more specific moral task of seeing things from another person’s point of view. This switch from a general to a more specific moral task also results in reorganizing the moral saliencies of the situation at hand.
Even Gilligan’s examples of shifting from the justice to the care perspective can be viewed as switching between the moral task of determining what is most fair and the moral task of determining what is most caring. Certainly some may not wish to describe this change in orientation as so closely intertwined with a task switch. There are surely other ways to describe the reorientation, but viewing the shift as tied to task switching accomplishes two objectives: (1) I emphasize that the perceiver's goals and activities have much more relevance to the perceived moral saliencies of a situation than most others have presumed, and (2) I deemphasize the role of inherent aspects of a situation itself and emphasize instead how much of moral perception is directed by the perceiver. In our day-to-day lives, different and competing saliencies occur primarily because we switch to different tasks with their accompanying different objectives.

Covey's mini-paradigm shift described at the beginning of this chapter could also be viewed as tied to his switching from the moral task of determining what would bring most peace and harmony to the passengers on the subway to the moral task of determining what would bring most comfort and compassion to the family whose mother had just died. There may have been others on the subway car who were entirely focused on their own tasks of whatever sort and thus failed to notice anything other than the fact that there were some loud but ignorable children in the “background.” Interestingly, it could even be argued that Covey experienced two gestalt shifts. The first was the shift in perception tied to his switching from a nonmoral reading task to the moral task of helping to bring about peace and quiet on the car, and the second was the shift tied to his switching to a distinctly different moral task of responding compassionately to a grieving family.

Past Experience, Analogies, Metaphors, and Connectionist Prototypes

Although switching tasks plays a significant role in day-to-day shifts in moral perception, it can also be argued that switching analogies, metaphors, and even concepts while engaged in an overtly moral task (such as moral deliberation or moral reflection) also results in gestalt shifts in moral perception. Chalmers, French, and Hofstadter (1992) describe “high-level perceptual processing” (involving the drawing of meaning out of situations) as consisting of a complex interaction between the process of making analogies (“mapping one’s situation to another”) and the process of perceiving the situation (“filtering and organizing [data] in various ways to provide an appropriate representation for a given context”) (192–195). Although they do not directly address either moral perception or gestalt shifts in perception, they note that there can be “rival analogies.” For example, we can shift between viewing Saddam Hussein as being like
Hitler and viewing him as being like Robin Hood, a "generous figure redistributing the wealth of the Kuwaitis to the rest of the Arab population" (199). It is doubtful that Americans would make such a shift spontaneously. We would have very little incentive to shift analogies in order to view Hussein as Robin Hood unless we made it our moral task, for example, to understand how his own people view him.

Connectionist models of the mind and perception also imply that we can experience gestalt-like shifts when our task becomes that of better understanding a situation. Churchland's analysis of "conceptual change versus conceptual redeployment" is of direct relevance to a discussion of gestalt shifts. He describes "conceptual redeployment" as "a process in which a conceptual framework that is already fully developed, and in regular use in some other domain of experience or comprehension, comes to be used for the first time in a new domain" (Churchland 1989, 237). Churchland gives the example of Huygens's applying his already well-developed "wave" conceptual framework to his understanding of light for the first time.

What is not clear in Churchland's account is how often and under what circumstances we "conceptually redeploy" in our deliberations and everyday lives. Many day-to-day gestalt shifts in perception are precipitated by the conscious switching of tasks, but there is also no doubt that sudden and unexplainable framework shifts periodically occur in our lives. If we conceive of conceptual redeployments merely as spontaneous framework shifts, redeployments seem few and far between. On the other hand, conscious switching to a rival analogy or a different metaphor should also count as conceptual redeployments. If so, we "conceptually redeploy" quite regularly. Both framework and component shifts in moral perception can be viewed in connectionist terms as switching between the activation of one moral prototype to the activation of a different (and in some way incompatible) prototype in order to make sense of particular situations.

Churchland does briefly examine the relationship of his connectionist model of the mind to moral theory. His description of what occurs in moral argument closely parallels my emphasis on gestalt shifts in moral perception. For Churchland, moral argument takes place when situations are ambiguous and "consists in trying to reduce the exaggerated salience of certain features of the situation, and to enhance the salience of certain others, in order to change which prototype gets activated" (Churchland 1989, 300).

Another interesting consequence of viewing knowledge as prototypical (in a connectionist sense of the word) is that we come to see knowledge as much more context dependent. In other words, the representations that lade our perceptions are context-dependent representations. Andy Clark expands on this notion when he writes,
Fodor-style classicists were seen to picture the mind as manipulating context-free symbolic structures in a straight-forwardly compositional manner.

Connectionists, not having context-free analogues to conceptual-level items available to them, have to make do with a much more slippery and hard-to-control kind of "compositionality" which consists in the mixing together of context-dependent representations. (Clark 1993, 25)

To illustrate what is meant by a context-dependent representation, Clark refers to Smolensky's "infamous coffee case." We experience coffee in a variety of contexts (liquid coffee in a cup, ground coffee in a can, and so on), and Clark argues that as a result, we do not have a single representation for coffee; rather, we have many different "coffee" representations. In connectionist terminology, a "coffee" representation comprises a set of activation patterns in the hidden units; these patterns vary because the contexts varied in which the net was "trained up" on coffee (Clark 1993, 24).

In the light of my definition of a gestalt shift, switching from one context-dependent representation of "coffee" to another context-dependent representation of "coffee" is tantamount to a gestalt shift. After all, it is a shift between two incompatible and "unmergeable" mental structures. We cannot unify our various coffee activation patterns into one all-purpose pattern but must switch between differing context-dependent mental structures depending on the context in which we are deploying the coffee concept. Nonetheless, it is important to reemphasize that there are degrees to which we shift between representations as we attempt to draw meaning out of a situation. These range from framework shifts (where a new and complex "wave" prototype is brought to bear on Huygens' perception of "light") to component shifts (where in a deliberation over a situation involving coffee, the perceiver can bring one of several coffee activation patterns to bear on the situation). It is interesting to note that even "coffee" can be tied to a moral perception. We could, for example, be engaged in the moral task of determining whether our being addicted to coffee is harmful to others. As we deliberate over this "addiction situation," we may shift between the activation of various context-dependent "coffee" representations.

The pervasiveness of gestalt shifts in connectionist models of the mind can also be illuminated by considering recent work of Mark Rollins on the plasticity of perception. He emphasizes plasticity in use or the strategy ladenness of perceptual knowledge and points out that much of our perceptual experience incorporates strategies having to do with which of our already-existing concepts to deploy in a given situation. He writes that
“plasticity-in-use is important because it can produce a change in the effectiveness of content even if not in content itself” (Rollins 1994, 42). Once again, the point can be made that whenever we re-strategize content use, whenever we redeploy concepts, we have shifted in a gestalt-like manner in our perceiving of a situation.

Flanagan Revisited

With the knowledge that switching between tasks, analogies, metaphors, and even contextualized concepts will result in gestalt shifts in our perceptions, it is worth re-examining Flanagan’s objections to the gestalt shift metaphor. His first concern is that “not all moral issues are open to alternative construals” (Flanagan 1991, 214). But I have stressed that the experiencing of gestalt shifts in moral perception is not determined primarily by the nature of the situation. Rather, in our more unreflective day-to-day moral perceptions, shifts are often tied to task switches. In our more deliberative moral “perceptions,” we can attempt a different perspective on any moral issue by attempting to see the situation “through someone else’s eyes” or by applying a different analogy or metaphor.

Flanagan’s second objection to the gestalt-shift metaphor is that “moral consideration, unlike visual perception, takes place over time and can involve weighing as much, and as messy, information as we like” (215). However, as I have pointed out, even moral deliberation or consideration over time of a particular situation may incorporate mental structures that conflict and cannot be merged into single “messy” mental entities. We cannot weigh and then merge as much, and as messy, information as we like when the information comes in context-dependent pieces.

Flanagan stresses that perceptions involving cognition and deliberation result in “all-things-considered judgments” (communication with Flanagan 1994). I agree that a deliberative moral perceiver has an ability to weigh alternatives and then arrive at an “all-things-considered” perspective on a situation. My point here is that even this consideration process will often involve shifting between gestalt-like, context-dependent mental structures. In other words, deliberative moral perceptions often involve selecting from various incompatible organizing structures rather than constructing a single “best” perspective using fine-grained, context-free mental elements. Flanagan appears to assume that moral deliberation consists in the manipulation of and recomposition of context-free representations, but connectionist models of mind give us no such fine-grained, context-free mental elements with which to “build” moral perceptions.

Flanagan’s final concern is that the gestalt shift metaphor “calls attention to the gross features of moral perception [but that] much of what is most interesting and individually distinctive about moral personality lies in the
small details of what is noticed, deliberated about, and acted on” (Flanagan 1991, 217). While what I term framework shifts stress the larger-grained overall organization of moral perception, there remain finely detailed and richly articulated saliencies within each framework. Shifts in and of themselves make no difference to the content of what we shift from or to. For example, when we shift to a rival analogy, we still have all the richness and detail of that analogy cognitively available. I have also argued throughout this chapter that not all shifts are framework shifts; many gestalt shifts are, rather, component shifts in how we view particular details. In many moral situations involving several actors, for example, we may not reframe the entire situation but shift significantly in our view of one of the “players.”

Conclusion

This discussion has linked moral perception with gestalt shifts by showing how we bring already-existing mental structures to bear on situations. Altering our perceptions by shifting between already-existing mental structures does not by any means comprise all of perceptual cognition—moral or otherwise. After all, much of learning involves the altering of previously existing mental structures and the creating of new mental structures. And much of moral thought involves reasoning—using the perceived saliencies of a situation as “input” to higher-level, traditionally rational mental processes. But it should also be clear that much of perceptual cognition itself—the drawing of meaning from situations—incorporates the application of various of our already-in-place concepts and conceptual organizations.

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Notes

1. For more on the related philosophy of science discussion of gestalt shifts, see Wright (1992).
2. Marilyn Frye (1983) proposes this type of figure-ground refocusing, for example, in situations where men have been viewed as the main actors and women as “stagehands” in the background; we can refocus these scenes so that the men recede and the women come into focus.
3. Switching from determining what is most fair to determining what is most caring may or may not result in our reorganizing our experience. If, for example, what is most fair also turns out to be what is most caring, it may be that no reorganization occurs. For more on how the concepts of justice and care can overlap, see Friedman (1987).
4. Sara Ruddick (1989) has similarly argued that the day-to-day work of mothers determines the kind of moral thinking they do.
5. My use of computer-task terminology here is not meant to convey a flippant attitude toward moral cognition. I take morality and the living of a moral life very seriously.
6. Since discussions of moral perception are often linked to discussions of moral realism, I should mention that I am neither a moral realist nor do I think that cognitive scientists and/or ethical theorists provide any compelling reasons for being so.

References


