

ARTICLE

Moral perception

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Abstract

Moral perceptualism is the theory that perception and perceptual experience is attuned to moral features in our environment. This idea has received renewed attention in the last 15–20 years, for its potential to do theoretical work in moral epistemology and moral psychology. In this paper, I review the main motivations and arguments for moral perceptualism, the variety of theories that go under the heading of “moral perception,” and the three biggest challenges to moral perception.

https://youtu.be/9cC_1ZYKq80

1 | INTRODUCTION

Suppose you are riding on a crowded subway when a woman boards carrying two full shopping bags. She struggles both to hold her bags and to stay on her feet. Immediately, you get up and offer her your seat.¹

What has happened here? Somehow, you were sensitive to the fact that getting up and offering your seat to the woman was a good thing to do. However, you needn't have undergone any complicated deliberation or reasoning; rather, you just saw what you should do.² Canonically, *moral perceptualism* is the theory that takes saw in the previous sentence, in some sense, literally. According to moral perceptualism, perceptual experience is crucial to detecting what is morally good and bad, right and wrong, and so forth.³ This contrasts with views according to which what is happening in cases such as the above is that you had an *a priori* intuition, or perhaps an immediate judgment, that you should help the woman.⁴

In what follows, I review and organize the recent literature on moral perception. In Section 2.1, I discuss some of the potential philosophical upshots of a successful theory of moral perception. Then, in Section 2.2, I briefly canvass three positive arguments for moral perception. In Section 3, I sketch the variety of different views that fall under the

¹This is a slight adaptation of an example from Blum (1994), 31.

²Things are more complicated, as we will see below—see Section 3.

³An interesting question that, as far as I know, has not been addressed in the literature on moral perception is whether moral perception extends beyond visual perception. As with other work in the philosophy of perception, the arguments and discussion are highly vision-centric.

⁴Audi (2004), Huemer (2007), Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014).

broader umbrella of moral perceptualism. In Section 4, I review the three most influential objections against moral perception. Finally, in Section 5, I sum up.

2 | MORAL PERCEPTION: MOTIVATIONS AND ARGUMENTS

2.1 | Motivations

Proponents of moral perception tend to have some combination of three motivations. The first has to do with its role in moral epistemology. Moral perception plays a few related roles for moral epistemologists. First, moral perception may be crucial for deliberative guidance, in the sense that our perceptual experiences could draw our attention to the features of our situation that are morally relevant.⁵ Consider the woman on the subway. Subways are often places of stimulus overload—people are talking on the phone, there are bright lights and advertisements, people are bumping up against you, and so forth. If our perception is attuned to home in on features of our situation that are morally salient, that provides us with deliberative possibilities that otherwise might not be available to us, such as allowing the woman to have your seat.

A second epistemological role that moral perception could play is in justifying contingent moral beliefs. The belief that *I ought to give up my seat to this woman* is one such example. On one classic (nonperceptualist) view of what is going on here, our belief in situations like this is justified in virtue of an (unconscious) inference such as:

1. This woman with the grocery bags is uncomfortable and would be more comfortable if she had a seat, whereas it would not make a big difference to me. (Known by perception).
2. You ought to, when at little cost to yourself and other things being equal, help to assist in making others more comfortable. (Known *a priori*).

Therefore,

I ought to give up my seat to this woman with the grocery bags.

But one may find this classic nonperceptualist view lacking or implausible. Perhaps such a theory is psychologically or phenomenologically implausible. To some theorists, the felt obligation seems too immediate or presentational to be the result of an inference.⁶

Finally, the most ambitious epistemological role that moral perception has been posited to play is as an ultimate and fundamental source for moral evidence and/or moral knowledge. According to this thought, moral perception can sometimes serve as a source of justification for moral beliefs which doesn't require *any* causal or epistemic role for background moral beliefs. Such a proposal offers to replace or supplement traditional, *a priori* theories of moral knowledge with a deeply empiricist alternative source for moral justification.

The second motivation relates to moral psychology. Moral psychologists want to understand a whole host of issues about where moral judgments come from and how they are related to rational and moral action. Let's consider each in turn.

If some version of moral perceptualism is true, then it could be a crucial part of the etiology of some of our moral judgments that they are caused by morally relevant perceptual experiences. Thus, moral perceptualism provides an alternative to standard theories of moral psychology according to which our moral judgments arise from intellectual seemings, rational insight, or conceptual understanding.⁷ A robust defense of moral perception could enrich how we understand the forming of moral judgments.

⁵Murdoch (1970), Blum (1994), DesAustels (2012). See also the discussion of "Attentional Moral Perception," below.

⁶Harman (1979).

⁷Of course, nothing about moral perception excludes any of these sources; there is space—and precedent—for hybrid views. See Audi (2013), Milona (2018).

Turn to the second explanandum. A central contention of many proponents of moral perception has to do with its role in the moral sensitivity and judgments of virtuous agents. For example, John McDowell endorses an Aristotelian theory of virtue according to which virtuous agents have a *sensitivity* to moral reasons which is properly characterized as perceptual, given that it is not based on background knowledge of universal principles.⁸ On such a view, the agent's moral perceptual skills are partially constitutive of her being virtuous. Similarly, moral particularists, who reject the truth of any general moral principles, often appeal to a special sort of moral sensitivity to explain moral judgments. This special moral sensitivity is often spoken of in perceptualist terms.⁹ This sensitivity may also be tightly connected to moral action, or acting-for-a-reason more generally.¹⁰

A final motivation for moral perception relates to moral phenomenology. Moral phenomenology is, roughly, the "what-its-likeness" of moral feelings, intuitions, and judgments.¹¹ Connections between moral perception and moral phenomenology could use further attention. Nonetheless, there are hints of phenomenological appeals to moral perception. The continental phenomenologist Edith Stein, for example, claimed that the suffering of others is properly direct and perceptual, in the way that our perception of three dimensional objects is properly direct and perceptual. Despite the fact that we aren't acquainted with the backside of a tomato, we still truly *see the tomato*, and not just its surface. Similarly, even though we are not directly acquainted with another person's suffering, we still truly *perceive* it, and not just its effects on behavior.¹² Robert Audi, working in a quite different intellectual framework from Stein, makes very similar claims about the phenomenology of moral perception.¹³

2.2 | Arguments for moral perception

Proponents of moral perception are often happy to motivate the view in broad outline, and then mainly "play defense," considering and responding to potential objections. But there are some positive arguments in the literature. I briefly consider three.

2.2.1 | Argument from Phenomenology

Perceptual experience has characteristic phenomenological markers.. It is fast. It is not a result of deliberation. It is subject to illusions that persist even when one knows better (e.g., Muller-Lyer illusion). It is phenomenologically presentational in a way that beliefs are not. Perhaps it represents nonconceptually. The first family of arguments for moral perception attempt to establish the existence of moral perception on the basis of the claim that moral experience shares some or all of these markers of perceptual experience. So the general schema of the argument is:

1. Features *A*, *B*, and *C* are distinctive markers of perceptual experiences (as opposed to beliefs, desires, intuitions, etc.).
2. Some moral experiences have features *A*, *B*, and *C*.

Therefore, some moral experiences are moral perceptions.

The challenge here is often not as much about showing that moral experiences have (at least some) of these relevant features. Rather, the challenge is often about showing that these features are *unique* to perceptual

⁸McDowell (1985), McDowell (1998, 50ff).

⁹Dancy (1993, 68), Dancy (2010).

¹⁰Hampton (1998, Ch. 4), McDowell (2006).

¹¹Explicit discussion of moral phenomenology as such goes back at least to Franz Brentano's discussion in *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*.

¹²Stein (1964), especially Chapters 2 and 4. See Brentano (1889).

¹³Audi (2013), Ch.1. It also seems as though Stein endorses something like what I call below "Attentional Moral Perception," whereas Audi endorses "Contentful Moral Perception".

experiences. *Intellectual seemings*, for example, are frequently posited to have many of the same markers that perceptual experience does. So showing that moral experiences are perceptions as opposed to *moral intellectual seemings* requires walking a tightrope.

2.2.2 | Argument by Analogy

A second kind of argument for moral perception is by analogy between moral properties and other properties which appear to be clearly perceptually knowable. The crucial difference between an Argument by Analogy and an Argument from Phenomenology is that the latter is concerned with the similarity of moral experiences with other, obviously *perceptual* experiences, whereas the former is concerned with the similarity of *moral properties* with other properties which are perceptible. Andrew Cullison provides a standard statement of this kind of argument:

Vintners can distinguish between different kinds of dry red wine. A park ranger can see that a particular tree is a silver maple as opposed to a sugar maple. Chicken sexers can see just by looking whether a particular chick is male or female. I can identify a friend from a distance...We perceive [these properties] in virtue of perceiving some directly observable, simpler properties...There is little reason not to extend this to moral properties.¹⁴

So the general schema of the argument is clear:

1. Properties X, Y, and Z are perceptible.
 2. Moral properties have all of the relevantly similar features of X, Y, and Z which makes them perceptible.
- Therefore, moral properties are perceptible, and when they are perceived we have moral perceptions.

Both Premises 1 and 2 have been questioned.¹⁵ Premise 2 in particular has been doubted on the grounds that moral properties are causally inert, which makes them ineligible for perceptual experience. This has resulted in further discussion on behalf of both proponents and opponents of moral perception.¹⁶

2.2.3 | Phenomenal contrast arguments

A third positive argument for moral perception is taken directly from the literature on philosophy of perception. In this literature, Siegel gives the most influential test for a property's perceptibility.¹⁷ These *phenomenal contrast arguments* begin by pointing to two experiences (either within a single agent over time, or between agents) which differ in their phenomenology. Such a phenomenal difference, once clearly established, requires some explanation. In at least some cases, or so Siegel claims, the best explanation of the phenomenal contrast is that the two experiences *perceptually* represent different properties. For example, perhaps the phenomenological difference between the tree expert, or the Russian reader, and the nonexpert or nonreader, is best explained by the representation of *pine-tree-ness* or semantic properties in the formers' visual experience.¹⁸

¹⁴Cullison (2010), 160.

¹⁵Against premise 1, see, for example, Reiland (2014, forthcoming). Against Premise 2, see, for example, McBrayer (2010b, who ultimately does not think the objection is unsuccessful), Chudnoff (forthcoming).

¹⁶Chudnoff (forthcoming), Werner (forthcoming).

¹⁷Siegel (2006, 2007, 2010).

¹⁸These examples are from Siegel (2006).

This style of argument has been widely adapted across philosophy of perception.¹⁹ Most importantly for present purposes, it has been used to attempt to establish moral perception.²⁰ Preston Werner has argued for moral perception by contrasting neurotypical individuals with what he calls “Emotionally Empathetic Dysfunctional Individuals (EEDIs)”.²¹ As with all phenomenal contrast arguments, he first argues that there will be phenomenological differences between neurotypical individuals and EEDIs when confronting morally loaded situations. Second, he argues that this phenomenological difference is best explained by positing moral perception in the neurotypical individual that (in at least some circumstances) the EEDI lacks.

It is contentious whether phenomenal contrast arguments are methodologically sound.²² And of course, their application in the moral case will fall if they are structurally poor arguments generally. But even assuming that the arguments are methodologically kosher, their success in the moral case has been questioned. The criticism centers on the second part of the argument—the explanation for the contrast. Plausible alternative explanations for the contrast in the moral case are that the contrast is better explained by an intuition/seeming state, a nonperceptual affective state or quick and unconscious inferences.²³

3 | VARIETIES OF MORAL PERCEPTION

Generally, moral perception involves an attunement to the morally relevant features of our environment. But a closer look at those who count themselves as endorsing moral perception actually reveals a few substantively distinct views. I'll divide these into three kinds of views.²⁴ I will sketch these three kinds of moral perception by considering three ways of conceiving the case of you and the woman on the subway. In the subway case, somehow you pick up on the features of this situation that prompt you to immediately get up and offer your seat. One way this could go is that, as a relatively virtuous agent, your attention is immediately drawn to the woman's distress and discomfort and to your ability to offer your seat. From the fact that these features of the situation jumped out to you as especially salient, you were able to quickly realize what the right thing to do was. Let's call this *Attentional Moral Perception*:

Attentional Moral Perception: An agent's patterns of attention to features of her perceptual environment are (in part) responsive and sensitive to features that are morally relevant.

Many who endorse moral perception appear to have something like Attentional Moral Perception in mind.²⁵ Furthermore, there is substantial empirical evidence that morally relevant features capture attention in perceptual processing.²⁶ A second way to interpret the subway situation involves a more direct way of conceiving of moral perception. On this view, you immediately offer your seat because your perceptual experience represented some normative property (or properties), such as the *badness* of the woman's distress, or the *rightness* of alleviating her discomfort. We can call this *Contentful Moral Perception*:

Contentful Moral Perception: An agent can represent moral properties as part of the content of her perceptual experience (along with shape, color, pitch, etc.).²⁷

¹⁹O'Callaghan (2011), Matthen (2015), Helton (2016), Di Bona (2017).

²⁰An important and often overlooked historical precursor here is Franz Brentano, who gives something closely resembling a phenomenal contrast argument in the case of the evaluative. See Brentano (1889).

²¹Werner (2016).

²²For an overview, see Helton (2016).

²³Chudnoff (forthcoming), Reiland (forthcoming), Väyrynen (2018), respectively.

²⁴I would be remiss to not also flag another different, but also excellent, discussion of the varieties of moral perception—Bergqvist and Cowan's (2018) introduction covers some of the issues that I do not discuss here for reasons of space.

²⁵Attentional theorists include Chappell (2008), DesAustels (2012), Clifton (2013), Railton (2014), and more controversially Murdoch (1970) and Cuneo's (2003) interpretation of Reid.

²⁶See Gantman and van Bavel (2015), and Werner (ms) for overview of this evidence.

As with Attentional Moral Perception, there are many theorists—both proponents and opponents—of moral perception who appear to have Contentful Moral Perception in mind when they discuss moral perception.²⁸ Furthermore, there is some (inconclusive) empirical evidence of Contentful Moral Perception.²⁹ A final conception of moral perception is less widely endorsed, at least explicitly, but has also been influential, due to its forceful defense in a series of papers by Sarah McGrath.³⁰ On this conception, moral perception does not consist in either attentional capture, nor of contentful representation of the moral properties in perceptual experience. Instead, McGrath claims, perceptual experiences can *immediately justify* moral judgments, even though the experiences themselves have no moral (or normative) content. Let's call this *McGrathian Moral Perception*:

McGrathian Moral Perception: While perceptual experiences do not contain any moral content, they are nonetheless capable of immediately justifying basic moral judgments.

McGrath motivates the plausibility of this idea by an analogy. Suppose a Humean view of perceptual content is correct. We can represent only very basic properties (shape, color, pitch, volume), but not sophisticated properties like natural kind properties or causation. Further suppose that, unlike Hume, you aren't skeptical that we have knowledge of these properties. So you have knowledge of, say, pine trees, and this isn't through perceptual experiences *as of* pine trees. But surely your knowledge of pine trees is also not *a priori*. So it must be that on the basis of some nonpine-tree-representing perceptual experiences, you are nonetheless able to form immediately and basically justified beliefs about pine trees. But if this is granted, then there is no reason to extend this line of reasoning to moral judgments, argues McGrath. And this is especially so if we think, as McGrath does, that there are instances of moral knowledge of contingencies that knowledge of moral principles can't explain.³¹

McGrathian Moral Perception is also contentious.³² But it is an interesting view because it may allow the proponent of moral perception to sidestep some of the objections commonly raised against moral perception, discussed below. One further distinction between views endorsed as moral perception first explicitly pointed out by Cowan (2015) is between theories of moral perception which we might call *Sense-Based* as opposed to those that are *Affect-Based*:

Sense-Based Moral Perception: Moral perception takes place in the experience of one or more of the "classical" sense modalities (vision, audition, tactile experiences, etc.).

Affect-Based Moral Perception: Moral perception takes place in affective or emotional experience, which is construed as epistemically and/or metaphysically analogous to experiences in the classical sense modalities.³³

Both of these views are often counted as versions of moral perception. Notice that the latter is probably best construed as a version of *Neo-Sentimentalism* (at least epistemically) and so may inherit the virtues and vices of such a view.³⁴ The former view is not a version of Neo-Sentimentalism and so must be assessed on its own merits.

These distinctions give us the following table of views plausibly called "moral perception":

²⁷Bergqvist and Cowan (2018) call this "Canonical Moral Perception".

²⁸Contentful theorists include McNaughton (1988), McBrayer (2010a, 2010b), Cowan (2014, 2015), and Werner (2016, 2018), and Lord (2018). Audi (2013) appears to endorse both of the previous views.

²⁹See Werner (ms) for an overview of the evidence.

³⁰McGrath (2004, 2011, 2018).

³¹McGrath (2018).

³²Wodak (2019).

³³Cowan (2015) calls these "Perceptual Intuitionism" and "Affective Intuitionism", respectively. I change the terminology to keep with the "perceptual" terminology I use throughout the paper. The 'intuitionism' terminology is, in my opinion, unhelpful because it suggests that these experiences are intuitions, which is a further commitment not required in virtue of endorsing moral perception as such.

³⁴See Kauppinen (2014) for an overview.

	Sense-Based MP	Affect-Based MP
Attentional MP	Sense-Based Attentional MP	Affect-Based Attentional MP
Contentful MP	Sense-Based Contentful MP	Affect-Based Contentful MP
McGrathian MP	Sense-Based McGrathian MP	Affect-Based McGrathian MP

Notice that this table is not exclusive—one could endorse a combination of views on the above table. Audi (2013), for example, appears to endorse at least all four of the categories in the top two rows, and he may endorse all six versions of the view.

4 | ARGUMENTS AGAINST MORAL PERCEPTION

4.1 | The “looks” objection

When first considering moral perception, an initial intuition that is often raised is that moral perception is a nonstarter, because moral properties don't have a distinctive “look”. This natural reaction to the view has remained quite influential. Michael Huemer states the worry concisely: “The point of interest here is that there is no such thing as *the way that wrongful actions look or the way that permissible actions look*. That is why you cannot literally see, with your eyes, that an action is wrong.”³⁵ We can see this argument as the flipside of the Argument from Phenomenology raised in Section 2. Since, the thought goes, a perceptual experience of some property *F* requires that *F* has a certain look, and since moral properties have no such looks, moral perception must be impossible.

Proponents of moral perception have addressed this objection head on.³⁶ Cullison (2010) appears to respond to the objection by endorsing a version of the McGrathian view discussed above. Werner (2016) argues that moral properties *do* have a distinctive look, contra the objection. And McBrayer (2010a), who has by far the most in depth discussion of this objection to date, considers a few different ways to flesh out the notion of “distinctive look” at work in the objection and argues that no reading of the claim results in a clearly sound argument.

4.2 | The causal objection

A second worry raised against moral perception focuses on the nature of moral properties, rather than on the nature of the purported moral experiences. In this way, it is the flipside of the Argument by Analogy, also raised in Section 1. According to this objection, moral properties are not even in principle eligible for representation in perceptual experience because they are causally inert. Because perception is an essentially causal process, perceptual experiences can only represent properties that have the power to *cause* those experiences. So again, according to this worry, moral perception is a nonstarter.

Proponents of moral perception have also responded to this objection. One path of resistance is to deny that moral properties are causally inert.³⁷ Another is to deny that the causal condition, properly construed, rules out moral perception after all. McBrayer (2010b) points out, for example, that secondary properties are, at least on one understanding, causally inefficacious. And yet no one denies that we can see that a table is *brown*. Once the causal constraint is reworked and made more precise, McBrayer argues, it turns out to be a nonaccidentality condition. And this condition could be met by any metaphysics for moral properties which endorsed the

³⁵Huemer (2007), p.86. See also Millar (2000).

³⁶Cullison (2010), McBrayer (2010a).

³⁷Oddie (2005), Cullison (2010). This strategy is probably open to most metaethicists who have naturalistic conception of the moral properties.

supervenience of the moral on the natural—a claim that even most nonnaturalists endorse. And so, he claims, the causal objection has no real force upon closer inspection.

4.3 | The objections from explanatory impotence

Two other related worries about moral perception are similar, but different in their purported upshots. The idea behind these two objections is not actually to directly *deny* the existence of moral perception; rather, the aim is to deny that moral perception has any explanatory payoff. Thus, at best, it exists but is philosophically and theoretically uninteresting.

The first of these worries is taken from a similar set of worries in the literature in the philosophy of perception. A recently discussed phenomenon in that literature concerns the empirical phenomenon of *cognitive penetration*. Without getting into the technical and scientific details, the idea here is that many of our perceptual experiences appear to be subject to all kinds of influences from background beliefs, desires, and stereotypes. (Note the similarities to the problem of theory-laden observations in science.³⁸) Granting the pervasiveness of this phenomenon (which the majority of cognitive scientists now accept³⁹), moral perception appears to be a *prime* candidate for this kind of effect. So even if we really see that we should help the woman on the subway—so the objection goes—this “seeing” only occurs given the causal influence of some belief in a moral principle about helping people in need. And so, all of the real—causal and epistemic—explanatory work is being done by the moral principle.⁴⁰ This objection has received scant response in the literature.⁴¹ It is also worth noting that this objection won't apply to someone motivated to defend moral perception for moral psychological or phenomenological reasons, so it is limited in scope.

A second type of explanatory impotence objection to moral perception takes its roots from the massively influential evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs) against moral realism.⁴² EDAs take many forms, but the broad outline is that the explanation for our moral beliefs are, if moral realism is true, unrelated to the moral facts. This serves as a defeater for all of our moral beliefs unless we reject realism. Thus, we should reject realism. Applied to moral perception, the simple thought here is just that, if moral perception is to play any interesting explanatory role in our metaethics, it had better turn out that there is some non-accidental relation between moral experiences and the presence of moral properties. But, *contra* McBrayer's (2010b) claim noted above, EDAs show that no nonaccidental relation could hold. So moral perception is explanatorily impotent.⁴³

The simplest response available to this objection is to abandon moral realism, or at least the kinds of moral realism that generate this problem. Moral perception is compatible with a wide variety of moral metaphysics—perhaps all but moral error theory. So the force of the objection is quite limited. As for moral realists who endorse moral perception, little has been said in response to this worry.⁴⁴ But one natural approach would be to adopt one of the standard responses to EDAs already in the literature and extend it to moral perception.⁴⁵

5 | SUMMING UP: A FUTURE FOR MORAL PERCEPTION?

We have seen reasons to care about whether moral perception is true, as well as arguments in favor of and against it. We have also seen that there is a diversity of distinct views which go under the heading of moral perception. Each

³⁸Raftopoulos (2015) has pointed this out most explicitly.

³⁹Firestone and Scholl (2016) represent one influential divergence from this general acceptance.

⁴⁰See Cowan (2014), Faraci (2015); Väyrynen (2008) is a good precursor to this kind of objection.

⁴¹Werner (2017, 2018).

⁴²See, Street (2006), Vavova (2015), and the vast literature that has followed.

⁴³Crow (2016), Faraci (2019).

⁴⁴One exception here is Rossi and Tappolet (2017).

⁴⁵See, for example, Enoch (2011, Ch. 7), Vavova (2014), Hanson (2017).

of these distinct ways of thinking about moral perception has implications for the success of both the arguments and objections to the view given above. There is space for further discussion of all of these issues, including, perhaps especially, the relationship between moral perception and evolutionary debunking arguments. But even setting this aside, moral perception probably also has implications for other aspects of moral psychology, moral epistemology, and even moral metaphysics and moral metasemantics which have gone virtually undiscussed. There is much work left to be done before assessing the ultimate plausibility and potential explanatory payoff of moral perception, in its many forms.

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ENDNOTES

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An interesting question that, as far as I know, has not been addressed in the literature on moral perception is whether moral perception extends beyond visual perception. As with other work in the philosophy of perception, the arguments and discussion are highly vision-centric.

Audi (2004), Huemer (2007), Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014).

Murdoch (1970), Blum (1994), DesAustels (2012). See also the discussion of “Attentional Moral Perception,” below.

Harman (1979).

Of course, nothing about moral perception excludes any of these sources; there is space—and precedent—for hybrid views. See Audi (2013), Milona (2018).

McDowell (1985), McDowell (1998, 50ff).

Dancy (1993, 68), Dancy (2010).

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Explicit discussion of moral phenomenology as such goes back at least to Franz Brentano's discussion in *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*.

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See Kauppinen (2014) for an overview.

Huemer (2007), p.86. See also Millar (2000).

Cullison (2010), McBrayer (2010a).

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