**20 Moral Intuition**

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When developing moral theories the standard practice makes use of intuitions. Is this *best* practice? Here, we scrutinize exactly how theorists rely on intuitions when attempting to improve their moral outlooks, we consider the epistemic credentials of this practice, and we explore some influential theories of intuitions that have the potential to either underwrite the standard practice or bankrupt it.

1. **Relying on Intuitions**

To get us started, consider the following cases. In *Doctor 1* a doctor has only one dose of a life-saving drug. There are six patients who need it. One patient needs the whole dose to survive. The other five each need 1/5 of the dose to survive. Question: Is it morally permissible to save five patients by giving them each 1/5 of the dose, leaving the one patient who needs the whole dose to die? Most people say that, at least intuitively, doing so is *permissible*.

In *Doctor 2* five patients will die in the near future, for they need various organ and tissue transplants that are simply unavailable . . . unless a doctor kills a lone patient who has just come in for a check-up and who happens to be an exact match for all five transplants (Harman 1977: 3-4). If the doctor lets the lone patient live, the five others will die. If the doctor saves the five he does so only by killing the lone patient. Question: Is it morally permissible to save the five by killing the one? Most people say that, at least intuitively, doing so is *impermissible*.

These are similar cases. One can either save 5 or 1. That seems like a very important, morally relevant fact. Yet our intuitive responses about the permissibility of these actions differ. And it is fair to say that part of the standard practice in moral philosophy is to take the intuitive difference seriously. Though it is hard to say exactly what ‘taking intuitions seriously’ comes to, at least it involves a defeasible inclination to believe that which we find intuitive. That is, most believe that *it is permissible to let the patient die in Doctor 1* and *that it is impermissible to kill the lone patient in Doctor 2*.

Importantly, the standard practice is not to blindly follow intuitions wherever they lead. In the doctor cases theorists also want to make sure there is a good explanation for why it is not always permissible to save the greater number. So they take intuitive verdicts like these and feed them into a more general form of inquiry where we consider things that cry out for explanation—e.g., why it is sometimes but not always OK to save the greater number—and we try to put them in reflective equilibrium with plausible explanatory principles.

Philippa Foot (1967), for instance, initially wondered whether the difference is well explained by *the doctrine of double effect* (DDE), which says that *intending* harm is worse than *merely foreseeing* it as a bad side-effect. It looks like the action in Doctor 2 involves intending the death of the lone patient, whereas the action in Doctor 1 does not involve intending the death of the untreated patient, but merely foreseeing that death as a side-effect of saving five others. If so, the DDE says that the action in Doctor 2 is thereby *worse* than the action in Doctor 1. And that can help explain the different intuitive verdicts for the cases. By contrast, the theory that it is always permissible to save the greater number simply does not capture the intuitive verdict for Doctor 2.

Foot didn’t stop there. For part of the standard method is to creatively craft additional cases that generate intuitions that can test our theories. So Foot crafted what we can call *Doctor 3:* A doctor can save five patients by manufacturing a drug for them, but doing so she will release a chemical into the room of another patient, killing her. Many people report that, at least intuitively, it is impermissible to manufacture the drug. But arguably the DDE would classify this as an *unintended but foreseen* harm, which leaves its impermissibility a puzzle. So Foot came up with another theory to try to explain all the intuitions: Our moral duties to avoid harming others are *more weighty* than our duties to aid them. I will not rehearse how this might help to explain the pattern of intuitive verdicts on the three Doctor cases, nor will I trace the proliferation of cases for testing this bit of theory, including Judy Thomson’s famous Trolley cases (Thomson 1985). I just want us to have a sense of the standard practice.

To get a fair picture of it I should hasten to emphasize that the practice not only considers intuitions about *cases*. Moral philosophers also take into account intuitions about more general propositions, including the intuitive plausibility of the theories that Foot considered, but also the intuition that one ought to bring about the best consequences, that two actions cannot have different moral qualities unless there is some non-moral difference between the two, etc. There are then disputes about how much relative weight to give the intuitions on cases verses those on moral general propositions.

Furthermore, we want our moral theories to be elegant, explanatorily powerful, and systematic, and we want them to comport with what we know about the rest of the world, including what we know from the cognitive sciences. For these reasons it is highly likely that the best moral theories will not respect *all* intuitive verdicts. At least some intuitive verdicts will be explained away as erroneous in a theory that is otherwise elegant, explanatorily powerful, systematic, and a good fit with the other things we know.

1. **What Are Intuitions and why Rely on Them?**

Granting that all this is part of standard practice, it is natural to wonder: *Why* is it standard practice? If I am trying to figure out how to live my life, or how to improve my moral outlook, how is a moral intuition relevant? Why take their deliverances seriously?

To begin to answer these questions it is useful to distinguish *a-theoretical* characterizations of intuitions from the deeper theory of what they are. An a-theoretical characterization is going to try to say enough about what intuitions are to identify them for further study. This is kind of like characterizing physical phenomena in a way that invites further scientific study, as we might identify the substance of water in terms of its surface features—clear, potable, freezes at a certain temperature, etc.—in a way that enables further investigation into the stuff. In the case of water, we have discovered that it comprises H2O molecules, and this discovered chemical composition helps to explain its a-theoretical surface features. The hope is that we might do something similar for intuitions.

1. **A-Theoretical Characterizations and Their Epistemology**

A-theoretically, then, there is growing consensus that ‘intuition’ is often used to refer to a special kind of *seeming state* that can be characterized in terms of its phenomenology and cognitive role. Seeming states just are states of mind whereby certain content *seems true* (cf. Bealer 2000: 3, Bengson forthcoming, Huemer 2005: Ch. 5, Chudnoff 2011a, Cullison 2010). Standard examples come from perception—it can perceptually seem that a tree is green and leafy or that there is water on the road ahead—and memory—it seems that I locked the door when I left the house. These states arguably have a certain phenomenological quality that is aptly described by saying that certain propositions seem true. The thought is that intuitions like those in the doctor cases are similarly states whereby some content seems true, albeit intuitively rather than, say perceptually or memorially.

There is also growing consensus that these seeming states are not mere beliefs. Consider: There are things we believe or we are inclined to believe, based on good evidence, but do not find intuitive. I believe I was born on March 18th, and I am inclined to believe that my son will speak French fluently, but these things are not intuitive. Further, belief in p, for many p, can be prompted by good evidence that p. But an intuition that p, for many p, is not prompted by any old good evidence that p; having an intuition takes the right kind of case or proposition. Last, intuitions *often* cause us to believe their contents, though it is possible to have an intuition that p without believing that p. You might become convinced that it is always permissible to save the greater number, and so disbelieve your intuition in Doctor 2. Similarly, we can also distinguish intuitions from hunches, guesses, blind impulses, vague sentiments, preferences for action, or current familiar opinion (Sidgwick 1907: 211-12).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Turning to epistemic matters, it turns out that our a-theoretical characterization of intuitions fits nicely with a plausible epistemic principle. I will put it like this: For all p, your belief that p based on it seeming to you that p enjoys some defeasible justification (cf. Chudnoff 2011b, Huemer 2006: 148, Pryor 2000). So if it seems to you that it is impermissible to kill the patient in Doctor 2, and on this basis you believe that the action is impermissible, your belief is to some degree defeasibly justified.

If all this is on the right track, the a-theoretical characterization of intuitions underwrites the standard practice. Suppose we have a bunch of moral intuitions – an intuition that P, and intuition that Q, . . . and so on. On this basis we believe, and have some defeasible justification for believing, that P, that Q, . . . and so on. Due to the defeasible justification it then makes sense to focus on P, Q, . . . and so on, considering what plausible theory best explains any pattern that emerges. In short, intuitions are a stepping-stone to justified beliefs, and inference to the best explanation, or some wider process of reflective equilibrium, operates on the contents of those justified beliefs. The outcome of the reflective equilibrium might be to ultimately reject P, Q, etc. But the main idea here is that intuitions might legitimately feed into a respectable form of inquiry that might not ultimately reject all intuitive verdicts.

Seen in this light, moral theory that relies on moral intuitions is just one domain among many where some things seem true, one thereby has some justification for believing that which seems true, and theory helps to best explain all that is true. Intuitions thereby help to adjudicate which moral theories are best *in the same way* that perceptual seemings help to adjudicate which scientific theories are best (see, e.g., Chisholm 1982: 18; Pollock & Cruz 1999: 195; Feldman 2003: 77; Pryor 2000: 519). In both cases we take into consideration not only what seems to be true of particular cases, but also the plausibility of general, explanatory propositions and the theoretical virtues of elegance, power, and systematicity.

1. **Intuition and Explanation**

Before we turn to deeper theories of intuitions and the concerns that surface there, the a-theoretical approach itself is the target of a number of objections. In the next several sections I will address some of the most common ones. In the process I hope to clarify the a-theoretical approach, its epistemology, and how all this relates to standard practice.

Let me phrase the first objection rhetorically: It is claimed that moral theory explains our intuitive verdicts, but how so? Suppose that I have the intuitions reported above for Doctor 1, Doctor 2 and Doctor 3. How is a bit of moral theory suited to explain why I am in these psychological states? As Peter Singer says,

[a] normative ethical theory . . . is not trying to explain our common moral intuitions. It might reject all of them, and still be superior to other normative theories that better matched our moral judgments. For a normative moral theory is not an attempt to answer the question “Why do we think as we do about moral questions?” . . . A normative morally theory is an attempt to answer the question “What ought we to do?” (2005: 345).

In reply, the mistake here is to think that moral theory is explaining *facts about intuitions* – who has which intuitions for which cases, how intuitions can be manipulated, etc. Those who defend the standard practice, however, would no doubt want to say that moral theory is trying to explain *the contents of the intuitions*, or what I have called the *intuitive verdicts*. We want to explain why it is impermissible to kill in Doctor 2, but permissible to fail to treat in Doctor 1, even when the numbers of living and dead match up. And moral theory *is* suited to explain that.

Compare: If we make some scientific observations about perturbations of a heavenly body’s orbit, we don’t just want to explain *why we made the observations*, which presumably must appeal to our psychology and not just the laws that govern the heavenly bodies. We also want to explain *the contents of the observations* (that which perceptually seemed true), viz., *why the heavenly body was THERE, then THERE, then THERE, etc.* We can leave psychology at the doorstep to explain the latter.

So critics need to focus on *the stepping stone principle* articulated earlier: For all p, your belief that p based on it seeming to you that p (including it intuitively seeming to you that p) thereby has some defeasible justification.

1. **Non-Inferential Justification?**

Before we get to those criticisms, another clarification is in order. It is commonplace to characterize intuitive justification as non-inferential justification. I am not certain what to make of this claim, but two points come to mind. First, the task is not to legitimate or debunk a move (possibly an inference) *from* *the belief* that one has an intuition that P *to* *the belief* that P. The task it to legitimate or debunk a move (possibly an inference) *from the intuition* that P *to the belief* that P.

Second, when we make this second move we *base belief on intuition*. It is not clear what this basing relation is, though it is no doubt causal. But whether or not it is an inference is of dubious importance. The key claim is that it is a movement of mind that can generate justified beliefs. We need to hear more about what it takes to be an inference, and why it matters whether or not a movement of mind is an inference, before we care about whether intuitive justification is non-inferential.

1. **Epistemic Internalism?**

Another concern about the stepping stone principle comes from epistemic externalist quarters. As articulated, the principle allows intuitions to justify beliefs without any reliable connection to the moral facts. To see this, imagine that we are being massively deceived by an evil demon (unbeknownst to us) and none of our seeming states are veridical. Still, according to the stepping stone principle we are justified in believing that things are as they seem to be.

A more externalist epistemology would pay more attention to the right connections with the external facts. For example, we might not want a belief to be justified unless it was produced by a reliable belief forming process, in which case we want beliefs based on intuitions to be part of reliable belief-forming process (Markie 2005: 356–57).[[2]](#endnote-2)

The epistemic internalism-externalism debate marks one of the major fault lines in epistemology more generally. It would be too much to discuss it in any detail here. But if some good connection with the facts is the primary concern you will be most interested in the deeper theories of intuitions in section 3, and whether those theories draw the right connections with the facts.

1. **Need We Calibrate First?**

Whether intuitions have a good connection with the facts is one thing. Whether we already have some evidence of this connection (or lack of it) is another. Robert Cummins would prefer a prior showing of reliability, or as he puts it, a *calibration* of our intuitions (Cummins 1998: 117) before we justifiably rely upon them. The biggest concern here is that we might not have any way of verifying the truth of intuitive verdicts that is independent of intuitions themselves. For key intuitions, like whether killing the lone patient in Doctor 2 is impermissible, but also whether pain is intrinsically bad and many other basic commitments of ours, there is a real concern that we cannot step outside our intuitions, take a peak at the facts, and note which intuitions are roughly right and which are not before we decide which ones to rely upon (cf. Ross 1930: 40–1; Brandt 1979: Chapter 1).

Cummins could reply that this is so much the worse for justifiably relying on intuitions. Then again, perhaps the desire for independent calibration is over-demanding. For we not only lack the means to independently calibrate intuitions. We lack the means to independently calibrate *any* seeming states, including perceptual ones. So Cummins’ admonition starts to look less like a prudential cautionary note and more like a recipe for full-blown skepticism (Sosa 1998). Perhaps all we can ever do is calibrate our judgments via reflective equilibrium. That is, we can make sure intuitive verdicts are not inconsistent with each other and with the other evidence we have. But that would be to carry out the standard practice, not to suspend it until we calibrate.

1. **Already Shown Unreliable?**

Some have argued that we already have good reason to believe that moral intuitions are in fact *unreliable*. Sinnott-Armstrong (2006), for example, argues that the following considerations should lead one to mistrust intuitively justified judgments without some non-intuitive corroboration of their contents: (i) which moral view one adopts affects one’s self-interests, so one is likely going to be biased when adopting a moral view; (ii) there is often moral disagreement without reason to think one party is more likely to be right than the other; (iii) emotions influence one’s moral view, and emotions cloud judgment; (iv) moral views are likely to be formed in circumstances conducive to illusion, and shown by heuristics and framing effects; and (v) moral beliefs might be the product of morally suspicious sources, e.g., if they are the result of the influences of the rich and powerful. His point is that, at least cumulatively, these influences require us to gather some confirming evidence for the contents of our intuitions, or show that some intuitions are not influenced by these factors.

Similarly, Michael Huemer (2008) has argued that ethical intuitions conflict, that they have been influenced by one’s culture, that they have been influenced by evolutionary pressures, that they sometimes support theories that promote one’s self- interests, that they sometimes line up with strong emotion, and that the abstract ones are prone to an overgeneralization bias. On these grounds he is inclined to place more trust formal intuitions, like the intuition that if a is better than b and b is better than c, then a is better than c (the transitivity of value), for he thinks such intuitions are less susceptible to the distorting influences.

1. **Is Disagreement a Problem?**

Let me give individual attention to a few items on these lists. First, disagreement. It is hard to assess the extent to which intuitions are shared among individuals. No doubt there is a lot of agreement. But suppose for the sake of argument that there is some domain of disagreement in intuition and intuition-based belief. Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that relying on intuitions is akin to reliance on the reading of one random thermometer in a box of one hundred thermometers, some portion of which are known to be unreliable (Sinnott-Armstrong 2007: 201).

I think this mischaracterizes the epistemic role of both seeming states and testimony. To see why, consider the following case of disagreement in perceptual seemings. Suppose you are presented with a card whose contents look like this:



Which line of a, b, and c is the same length as x? B, of course, or so it seems. But now imagine that several other people report that it looks to them that a or c is the same length as x.[[3]](#endnote-3) What is the justified response on your part? Perhaps you would take another look at the lines, or measure things out. But what if you cannot do so? Should you treat your perceptual seeming as randomly selected from a set of seemings, some portion of which are unreliable? That is, should you suspend judgment on which line is the same length as x?

I think not. The way things *look* *to you* plays a different epistemic role than *reports* about the way things look *to others*. Perhaps you would reduce your confidence that b is the same length as x, but you would be justified if you maintain the belief. So here we have a clear case where disagreement in how things seem does not epistemically obligate you to treat your seeming as randomly selected from the pool of disagreeing intuitions. Arguably, so it goes with disagreement in moral intuition. At least, anyone who would make an exception for ethical intuitions in this regard has some explaining to do.[[4]](#endnote-4)

1. **Experimental Manipulation?**

But do we otherwise know that moral intuitions are formed under circumstances conducive to illusion? There are some relevant studies to consider. One set of studies shows the effects of word choice when describing cases that elicit intuitions. In Petrinovich and O’Neill (1996) subjects were given trolley-type cases, where one must choose between saving/killing the greater number and the lesser number. If given an option couched in terms of ‘kill’ wording (e.g., ‘to throw the switch which will result in the death of the one innocent person’), subjects on average disagree slightly with the action, whereas if given an option in terms of ‘save’ wording (e.g., ‘to throw the switch which will result in the five innocent people on the main track being saved’), subjects on average slightly agree with the action.

That same paper reported other studies that showed ordering effects. Subjects were asked to indicate their approval of actions (described in terms of saving) in three trolley-type questions given in sequence. One set of subjects got the questions in one sequence, and another set of subjects got the same questions in reverse sequence. On average, subjects more strongly approved of an action when it appeared first in the sequence than when it appeared last, and the degree of approval for the middle case varied depending on which of the other two trolley-type cases came first.

From effects like these, Sinnott-Armstrong argues that it is reasonable to “assign a large probability of error to moral intuitions in general” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008: 99). For him, any given moral intuition must be shown to be immune from such effects before it can be justified.[[5]](#endnote-5) But it is not clear that this is the conclusion to draw. For one, it is noteworthy that the order effects did not show subjects changing from approval to disapproval of an action based on the order in which it was presented. The effect was a shift in *the degree of approval* for action. So it might be misleading to talk of unreliability in this context. Second, Petrinovich and O’Neill (1996) report a set of trolley-type cases that did not show order effects at all (discussed in Sinnott-Armstrong 2008: 61). Third, even if we grant that there are framing effects in the lab, it is not clear that such effects should encourage us all to suspend judgment on *all* intuitively justified beliefs. For one, we do not have enough evidence to generalize from the cases where framing effects have been shown to say that *all* intuitions are subject to these effects. For another, we are aware of these effects in a number of other domains, but we do not conclude in those domains that all judgments in those domains are unreliable. So though the framing and ordering effects are interesting and we should take them into consideration when improving our moral outlooks, it is not clear that they support the conclusion that moral intuitions are unreliable.

1. **Distorting Influences?**

There is still a general concern that our moral judgments have been influenced by things that have nothing to do with the moral facts. It is unclear, for example, whether evolutionary forces and cultural forces would push us toward the formation of accurate moral judgments or not (see Street’s Darwinian Dilemma in her 2006). While concerns of this sort need not target intuitions *per se*, the concern can be directed at intuitions and whether they are good indicators of the moral facts. And the concerns can be developed in a couple of ways.

First, we might worry that some of these historical forces have made our intuitions sensitive to *morally irrelevant considerations*, such as whether someone in need is a relative of ours or not. I think there is growing recognition, however, that whether some consideration counts as morally relevant is a moral question. It is not clear how to decide the matter without engaging in the standard practice, which makes use of intuitions. Once we have decided what considerations are morally relevant we can turn to the etiology of intuitions and dismiss some of them as sensitive to morally irrelevant facts. But this is to enlist the method of relying on intuitions rather than discard it.

Second, we might simply wonder how *likely* it is that the forces responsible for our moral intuitions and subsequent judgments help those intuitions and judgments reflect the moral facts (whatever they are). If it seems unlikely that intuition would be a good guide, perhaps this counts as a defeater for intuitively based justification. I myself have pressed arguments along these lines, and I tend to think they have most force if we think the moral facts we are trying to represent correctly are non-natural (or sui generis) facts (Bedke 2009, 2014). But these issues remain hotly contested.

1. **Theories of Moral Intuitions**

So far we have worked with an a-theoretical characterization of intuitions as seeming states with certain surface features that we would like to explain. Those surface features include i) a certain phenomenological quality aptly characterized as a phenomenology of seeming true intuitively, a phenomenology similar to but distinct from other ways of seeming true (e.g., perceptually), ii) a characteristic role in cognition whereby intuitions are prompted only by certain cases or propositions (not just any case or any good evidence will generate an intuition), where iii) the phenomenology and cognitive role helps to distinguish intuitions from beliefs, inclinations to believe, hunches, guesses, other kinds of seeming states (e.g., perceptual ones), etc., and where iv) the standard practice is to rely on them when attempting to improve one’s moral outlook. Further, v) intuitions a-theoretically conceived fall under a plausible epistemic principle – the stepping stone principle.

I now turn to deeper theories of these states that have the potential to explain the surface features, and which could help us decide whether intuitions indeed have the epistemic credentials needed to underwrite the standard practice.

1. **Self-Evidence**

On one historically influential view intuitions have something to do with self-evident propositions. According to Robert Audi, a self-evident proposition is “a truth” such that “an adequate understanding of it is sufficient both for being justified in believing it and for knowing it if one believes it on the basis of that understanding” (Audi 1998: 20, 1999: 206, 2004: 49; see also Audi 2008: 478). Similarly, Russ Safer-Landau says “A proposition p is self-evident = df. p is such that adequately understanding and attentively considering just p is sufficient to justify believing that p” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 247).

As for candidate self-evident moral propositions, many philosophers have focused on certain general moral principles. W. D. Ross, for example, thought that there were seven self-evident moral duties, such as the duty to keep one’s promises. But others have suggested that verdicts on cases can be self-evident (Clarke 1706: 226 (academic pagination), Prichard 1912: 28).

According to self-evidence theory, then, (some) intuitions have their distinctive surface features because they are states whereby one understands a self-evident proposition. Other states, such as standard beliefs, inclinations, hunches, perceptual seemings, etc., are not understandings of self-evident propositions, so it makes sense that intuitions would differ in phenomenology and cognitive role.

This sounds like the sort of theory that would support the epistemic credentials of intuitions and underwrite the standard practice. But in fact the theory simply states that intuitions have epistemic credentials. After all, we are told that a self-evident proposition is a truth such that understanding it can *justify* believing it.[[6]](#endnote-6) So the view does not provide *independent* grounds for thinking that intuitions play a certain epistemic role.

Maybe it could. If we had some non-epistemic characterization of what understanding a self-evident proposition amounts to we might be able to use that bit of theory to independently evaluate the epistemic credentials of intuitions. The major concern here is whether we have clear enough ideas of *understanding* and *self-evidence* that are not merely high-minded ways of recapitulating the a-theoretical characterization of intuitions and the epistemic role they would need to underwrite the standard practice. My own view is that we await theoretical advance on this front before self-evidence theory can bear explanatory weight.[[7]](#endnote-7)

1. **Intellectual Perception**

Another theory says that (some) intuitions are the deliverances of *intellectual perception*. The point here is to draw a parallel with perception of the physical world. Just as we might *visually* see/apprehend that some object is spherical, we might *intellectually* see/apprehend that anything that is yellow is colored. We might intellectually see that any belief that is luckily formed in a certain way is not knowledge. And, coming to a moral case, we might intellectually see that saving five patients by killing one in Doctor 2 is impermissible.

Proponents of intellectual perception can focus on an intellectual ability to grasp properties/universals and relations among them (Huemer 2005: 126). They can then explain that intuitions have their distinctive surface features because they involve a distinctive sort of relation to abstract properties and their relations – the relation of *intellectual grasping*. Moreover, theory looks like it will vindicate the epistemic credentials of intuitions and underwrite the standard practice.

The main concern is this: Is the idea of grasping abstracta sufficiently illuminating to bear much explanatory weight? Arguably not. And to the extent we try to clarify the explanatory resources here there is a danger that they are objectionable in their own right. For it can look like we are positing strange mental powers and relations to a Platonic realm, which strikes some philosophers as mysterian. Of course, not everyone thinks these explanatory resources are objectionable or mysterious (Chudnoff 2013, Bengson 2015; see also Audi 2010, 2013, Cowan 2015, Dancy 2010, McBrayer 2010 and Väyrynen 2008).

1. **Conceptual Competence**

Another theory of intuitions begins with the idea of conceptual competence. The rough idea is that conceptual competence brings with it some implicit knowledge of the criteria for falling under the concept. These criteria are special in that they demarcate the very boundaries of the concept, or the very boundaries of what the concept is about. So when these criteria are present in a case this is a very special sort of evidence that the concept applies. Last, it is possible to craft cases and propositions in such a way that they directly engage one’s conceptual competence; that is, certain cases and propositions enable one to recognize the presence (or determinate absence) of the conceptual criteria for concept application. For some views sympathetic to this line of thought see, e.g., Goldman (2007, p. 4; 2013, passim), Graham and Horgan (1994), and Ludwig (2007).

One theory, then, is that some case-based intuitions just are states of categorizing with a concept based solely on conceptual competence, and some intuitions concerning more general propositions are recognitions of conceptual connections based solely on one’s conceptual competence.

This helps to explain why intuitions have distinctive surface features, including a special phenomenological quality and cognitive role. Of course, the details about what conceptual competence amounts to, and the psychology and metaphysics behind it, can be filled in in a number of ways. In fact, some would articulate conceptual competence in terms of a capacity to grasp abstracta and relations among them.[[8]](#endnote-8) But to make this theory distinct from the others already canvassed let us think of competence as an ability to apply psychologically encoded criteria and an ability to draw connections between concepts based on their psychological roles.

This theory is also poised to vindicate the epistemic credentials of intuitions and to underwrite the standard practice. If intuitions are based on conceptual competence then presumably they are by-and-large accurate, and so we would need some reason to question the defeasible justification of beliefs based on them, and we would need some reason to question the broader practice of treating intuitive verdicts as data to be explained by our best theorizing.

The main concern is whether conceptual competencies exist, or whether concept possession is criterial. Even if this concern is met, there is a more specific problem when we apply this theory to moral intuitions. For it seems like many moral intuitions are not driven by conceptual competence alone. In Doctor 2, for example, it seems overblown to say that someone who does not share the intuition of impermissibility either lacks our concept of impermissibility, or fails to consider the case attentively, or makes some conceptual mistake in applying the concept to the case. They might be mistaken in their judgment, but it does not seem to be a *conceptual* mistake.

Based on these and other considerations, I have elsewhere suggested that moral intuitions might be a special kind of conceptually-grounded intuition, one where conceptual competence identifies potentially speaker-variant criteria (and attitude-involving criteria) for falling under moral concepts (Bedke 2008, 2010, forthcoming). Further consideration of this position would take us too far afield. Suffice it to say that any theory of moral intuitions that grounds them in the exercise of conceptual competence is going to have to say something to explain why variations in certain moral intuitions do not appear to betray a failure of conceptual competence.

1. **Outputs of System 1 Processing**

The last theory of intuitions I will consider comes out of the psychological literature. It starts with the idea that cognition has two reasoning processes, system 1 and system 2. System 1 processing is characterized as implicit, fast, automatic, low effort, and modular (think of gut reactions based on stereotypes and heuristics), while system 2 processing is explicit, slow, deliberative, effortful, and general-purpose (think of deductive reasoning with many premises). Drawing on this independently supported distinction in cognitive science, some psychologists working on moral cognition have suggested that (some) intuitions are affective responses from system 1 processing (Haidt 2001; Haidt and Bjorklund 2008).[[9]](#endnote-9)

When it comes to explaining the surface features of moral intuitions, the primary concern with the system 1 – system 2 approach is that it lumps intuitions in with all sorts of other judgments that do not have the same surface features. Hunches, guesses, blind impulses, vague sentiments, preferences for action, popular opinions, etc. are likely the outputs of system 1, but we can pre-theoretically distinguish these states from intuitions. It looks like we need a finer-grained theory to explain why intuitions have a different phenomenology and cognitive role than these other states.

Further, if this theoretical approach can be made to work it is not a blanket vindication of the epistemic credentials of intuitions. One of the main concerns from this literature is that some system 1 judgments will be sensitive to *morally irrelevant* factors. We might be able to explain, for example, why we have *evolved* a knee-jerk reaction to *actively* *killing* *someone*, but no similar knee-jerk reaction to *letting* *someone* *die*. But it is unclear what that evolutionary explanation has to do with the moral facts. Similarly, there is going to be some good scientific explanation for why we recoil at the thought of eating our deceased loved ones, and this might lead us to judge it wrong via system 1 processing, but this reaction and this judgment arguably has nothing to do with the moral status of the action and has everything to do with avoiding diseases in some ancestral environments.

To press the concern we need some idea of what counts as a *morally irrelevant* factor. And, as we have already seen, to discern what is morally relevant we need to rely on our intuitions. So this (partial) theory of intuitions interacts with information from cognitive science and the standard method in moral inquiry to vindicate some intuitive verdicts and debunk others.

1. **Conclusion**

Clearly, the use and study of moral intuitions is a very rich field. There seems to be growing consensus on the a-theoretical matters, and the remaining points of contention are well known. The future of the field is sure to extremely engaging for philosophers and cognitive scientists alike.

**Related Topics**

Moral Intuitions and Heuristics, Modern Moral Epistemology, Contemporary Moral Epistemology, Rationalism and Empiricism, Moral Perception, Method in Moral Epistemology

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**Further Reading**

W. D. Ross (1930) *The Right and the Good*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press. (A classic defense of ethical intuitionism, which combines an intuitional epistemology with various other theses.) Michael Huemer (2005) *Ethical Intuitionism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (Contains an influential modern defense of ethical intuitionism.) Robert Audi (2004) *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. (Combines an intuitional epistemology with some elements of Rossian deontology and Kantian moral theory.) Philip Stratton-Lake (ed.) (2002) *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-Evaluations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (A nice collection of modern essays). Elijah Chudnoff (2013) *Intuition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Defends a theory of intuitions generally, not just ethical intuitions, with special attention to their phenomenology).

1. We could use the term ‘intuition’ to label a different sort of state. But I think there is a type of seeming that we often refer to with ‘intuition’, and with those states lie the interesting epistemic and theoretical issues. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Shafer-Landau (2003: chs. 11-12) for a view that mixes some elements of internalist and externalist epistemologies. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a relevant experiment, see Asch (1951). For a clip go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfJA. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For related discussions about taking others to be epistemic peers, see Audi (2008: 490) and Enoch (2010: 979-81). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Note that the studies above ask participants to register their *approval of action* rather than to classify actions under moral categories (e.g., impermissible, permissible). So it is not clear that the studies focused on moral intuitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Both Audi and Schafer-Landau say that self-evident justification does not entail indefeasibility and one can adequately understand a self-evident proposition and yet fail to believe it (see, e.g., Audi 2004: Ch. 2, and Shafer-Landau 2003: Ch. 11). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It looks like Audi would characterize self-evidence in terms of conceptual containment and the application of concepts (Audi 2008, p. 479). In my view, this transforms the theory into a version of the conceptual competence theory, to be discussed below. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The classical position is represented in Russell (2008 [1912], chs. IX–XI). See also Huemer (2005, pp. 124–126), and Cuneo & Shafer-Landau (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Based on fMRI scans of brain activation, Joshua Greene (2008) has argued that consequentialist judgments are largely the products of system 2 while deontologist judgments are largely the products of system 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)