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The epistemic value of intuitive moral judgements

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In this article, I discuss whether intuitive moral judgements have epistemic value. Are they mere expressions of irrational feelings that should be disregarded or should they be taken seriously? In section 2, I discuss the view of some social psychologists that moral intuitions are, like other social intuitions, under certain conditions more reliable than conscious deliberative judgements. In sections 3 and 4, I examine whether intuitive moral judgements can be said not to need inferential justification. I outline a concept of moral intuition as a seeming whose seemingness resides in special, phenomenological features such as a felt veridicality, appropriateness, familiarity, or confidence, and whose justificatory force is influenced by the reliability of the belief-producing procedures and by a subject's competence in applying moral concepts. I argue that subjects can come to realise that the beliefs expressed in their intuitive judgements evoke a sense of non-inferential credibility. In section 5, I first discuss the contribution of moral expertise to the non-inferential credibility of a person's intuitions. Subsequently, I discuss whether Walter Sinnott-Armstrong is right in saying that we can never claim non-inferential justification for our intuitions because they are subject to all kinds of distorting influences.

Keywords: deliberative reasoning; epistemology; intuitive judgements; intuitive thinking; moral education; moral expertise; moral intuition; seeming

1. Introduction

In the last decade, social psychologists have developed an interest in expressions of moral (dis)approval which they call 'moral intuitions' or 'intuitive moral judgements'.[1] From their point of view, moral intuitions belong to the wider category of social intuitions. Social intuitions are, for example, the first impression regarding whether people one meets are trustworthy. Undoubtedly, especially the publications of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt familiarised moral philosophers with psychological studies of moral intuitions (Haidt 2001, 2007; Haidt and Bjorklund 2008a, 2008b). Haidt stands in a long tradition of psychological research into the differences between two cognitive processes: the unconscious intuitive process and the conscious rational process (Bargh 1996; Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Sloman 1996; Stanovich and West 2000; Wilson 2002). Haidt (2001, 818) defines moral intuition as:

> the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good–bad, like–dislike), without any awareness of having gone through steps of searching,

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weighing evidence, or inferring a moral conclusion. Moral intuition is therefore the psychological process that the Scottish philosophers talked about, a process akin to aesthetic judgment. One sees or hears about an event and one instantly feels approval or disapproval.

When someone is asked what he thinks of humans having sex with animals, his immediate reaction may be that it is disgusting and wrong. This is an intuitive moral judgement. According to Haidt, the intuitive process is the default process, which regulates everyday moral judgements in a rapid, easy and holistic way. Not only does he contend that most of our everyday moral judgements are intuitive, he also thinks that conscious deliberative moral reasoning is usually post hoc and defensive ('lawyers' reasoning'), and rarely causes moral judgements directly. Both psychologists and moral philosophers criticised Haidt for his views on the relation between intuitive moral judgements and deliberative reasoning (Pizarro and Bloom 2001; Saltzstein and Kasachkoff 2004).[2] In this article, I deal with the question whether intuitive moral judgements have any epistemic value. Are they mere expressions of irrational feelings that should be disregarded or should they be taken seriously?

In section 2, I discuss the view of some social psychologists that moral intuitions are, like other social intuitions, under certain conditions more reliable than conscious deliberative judgements. I will argue that it is difficult to conduct empirical studies that might prove that this view is correct, because in many cases we do not know what the right criteria are for evaluating our judgements and decisions. In sections 3 and 4, I examine whether intuitive moral judgements can be said not to need inferential justification; in other words, whether they are epistemic intuitions. Following Bedke (2008), I describe a moral intuition as a kind of intellectual seeming of which the seemingness is wholly constituted by positive phenomenological features such as a felt veridicality, appropriateness, familiarity, or confidence. In section 4, I argue that, although psychological intuitions are not *per se* epistemic intuitions, subjects can come to conclude that the beliefs expressed in their intuitive judgements evoke a sense of non-inferential credibility. In section 5, I first discuss the influence of the level of moral competence of a person on the claim that his intuitions are non-inferentially justified. Subsequently, I discuss whether Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, 2008) is right in saying that we can never claim non-inferential justification for our intuitions because they are subject to all kinds of distorting influences. I argue that subjects are *pro tanto* justified in claiming non-inferential justification for their intuitions if they can show that they are aware of influences that can distort their beliefs and are willing to reconsider their intuitions if there is evidence of these influences.

2.   Psychologists' views on the reliability of moral intuitions

Psychologists think of moral intuition as belonging to the general category of social cognition, where this has to do with information processing involved in navigating the social world. According to the philosopher Jim Woodward and the psychologist John Allman (2007), one role of social emotions and of moral intuition is to help overcome the limitations of purely analytical or rule-based decision-making procedures such as cost–benefit analysis. The problem, they say, with trying to make moral decisions on a purely analytical basis is that we will quite likely leave out (or fail to pay sufficient attention to or to be motivated by) considerations that are important even from a cost–benefit perspective. The number of different dimensions or different kinds of considerations that human beings are able to fully take into account in explicit conscious rule-guided

decision-making is fairly small (2007, 94 ff.). As evidence, they refer to a study by psychologists Ap Dijksterhuis et al. (2006).

The characteristics of conscious and unconscious thought led Dijksterhuis et al. to postulate the 'deliberation-without-attention' hypothesis, on the relation between mode of thought or deliberation (conscious versus unconscious) and the complexity and quality of choice. Complexity is defined as the amount of information a choice involves. A choice between objects for which one or two attributes are important (such as oven mitts or toothpaste) is simple, whereas a choice between objects for which many attributes are important (cars or houses) is complex. They hypothesised that conscious thought, due to its precision, leads to good choices in simple matters. However, because of its low capacity, conscious thought leads to progressively worse choices with more complex issues. Because of its relative lack of precision, unconscious thought (i.e. deliberation without attention) is expected to lead to choices of lower quality. However, the quality of choice does not deteriorate with increased complexity, allowing unconscious thought to lead to better choices than conscious thought under complex circumstances, this latter idea being the kernel of the deliberation-without-attention hypothesis. Dijksterhuis et al. investigated this hypothesis in a number of experiments in which they compared the quality of choices between alternatives under different conditions. In these experiments, some people were not given the opportunity to think at all before choosing between alternatives. Others were able to consciously think for a while before choosing, and still others were distracted for a while before choosing and thus could engage only in so-called unconscious thought. In the first experiment (Dijksterhuis 2004), participants were given information about four hypothetical apartments in their home city, Amsterdam. Each apartment was described by 12 different features, for a total of 48 pieces of information, presented in random order. One of the four apartments was made more desirable than the others (it had predominantly positive features), whereas a second one was made undesirable (it had predominantly negative features). The two remaining apartments were more neutral. After the participants had read the overwhelming amount of information, they were asked to evaluate each apartment. Only the unconscious thinkers reported the appropriate preference for the desirable apartment. The participants who had to choose immediately or who engaged in conscious thinking did not indicate a preference for the desirable apartment over the undesirable one, because their task was too difficult.

In another article, Dijksterhuis and Nordgren state that the usefulness of an intuition depends on the extent of the unconscious thought on which it is based, and on whether the unconscious had access to the most important information. Not only time, also experience probably plays a role. An expert may need less time and his intuitions may be better (Dijksterhuis and Nordgren 2006, 106). Similar to Haidt, Dijksterhuis et al. connect intuitions to unconscious thinking. However, they distinguish between intuitions that are made quickly and intuitions based on thorough unconscious thinking. Whether immediate decisions are often good, they do not know. Anecdotal evidence, they say, suggests two important moderators that may be tested in future research. First, immediate intuitions that were good were made by experts. Second, the quick judgements were always binary ('good' versus 'bad', 'real' versus 'fake'). They think that it is unlikely that immediate intuitions are very good when the judgements involved are more complex (Dijksterhuis and Nordgren 2006, 106, note 4).

Woodward and Allman think that the results of these and other studies suggest that unconscious processing can sometimes lead to better judgements than conscious deliberation, at least when the decisions involved are 'personal' or 'prudential'. They argue that there is sufficient similarity between social intuitions and moral intuitions to derive conclusions on

the reliability of moral intuitions from studies on the reliability of social intuitions. They hold that when what we call a moral intuition is functioning in a 'normatively appropriate way', it will reflect the operation of the adaptive unconscious on a range of relevant considerations and experiences, issuing a similar sort of gut feeling about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of some course of action. If Woodward and Allman (2007, 185) are right, we may assume that psychological moral intuitions will at least sometimes lead to judgements/ decisions that are superior to those arrived at on the basis of more deliberative and rule-based decision-making strategies. However, much depends on whether they are right in suggesting that there is sufficient similarity between social and moral intuitions.

Social intuitions function within the interpersonal domain. The understanding of, for example, the behaviour, emotions and facial expressions of others is largely intuitive. Intuitive judgements also guide how we present ourselves to others. These kinds of intuitions are surely relevant for some of our moral decisions, but they are of no help when judging, for example, whether sex between brother and sister is right, or for decisions on issues of life and death. So, I do not think we are justified in inferring conclusions on the reliability of moral intuitions from studies on the reliability of social moral intuitions. I do not deny that intuitive moral judgements may sometimes lead to decisions that are superior to those arrived at on the basis of conscious moral deliberation. However, this should be established by specific studies on the reliability of moral intuitions.

In many domains, we can determine the reliability of intuitions because there is a broad agreement on the relevant criteria. The subjects in Dijksterhuis' experiment seem to know which attributes a desirable should have. If we know what the criteria for a correct moral decision on a specific issue are, we could design an experiment similar to that of Dijksterhuis. There are moral cases where there is an agreement on the relevant criteria. Imagine that a team of doctors has to decide which patient on the waiting list should get a donor heart. They agree that the donor heart should be allocated to the patient who needs it most. The simple condition could be that there are only three single white male candidates who are characterised by a small number of relevant features: how much they are in pain and how long they can survive without a donor heart. In the complex condition one of the candidates is a young white divorced male who has to care for three children under 10 years, another a white female drug addict, and the third a married black male without children. The candidates differ with respect to the duration of their heart problem, the amount of suffering, their length of survival without a new heart, and the chances of a successful transplantation. Deliberate decision-making requires that all the candidates should get scores relevant for determining their neediness. Contrary to the complex condition, there is no difficulty in comparing and weighing the scores in the simple condition. If the analogy between social and moral intuitions holds, intuitive, unconscious thinking should lead to the best decision in the complex condition. This case, however, is not representative for situations in which moral decisions are required. In many cases, we do not know what the right criteria are for evaluating our judgements and decisions. Take, for example, decisions on the genetic modification of animals for the production of medicines or on the provision of prenatal genetic diagnosis. Contrary to the case I presented above, in such cases, because of the lack of consensus on the right criteria, it is impossible to determine retrospectively whether an intuitive judgement is superior to a reasoned judgement.

3.   (Moral) intuitions from an epistemic point of view

Intuitive thinking can be seen as the source of intuitive judgements. By investigating whether intuitive thinking generally leads to the best decisions within complex social

situations, we are examining the reliability of this source. If it can be established that intuitive thinking is a reliable source, we are justified in listening to our intuitive judgements. In recent years, reliabilist theories of justification have gained popularity (Dretske 1982; Goldman 1992; Nozick 1981). Reliabilists claim that what makes beliefs probably true is the dependability of the process or procedure by which the belief comes to be held or is (causally) sustained. Although I do no want to preclude that intuitive moral judgements on complex cases are (generally) more reliable than reasoned judgements, it is, as I have argued in the previous section, impossible to prove the superiority of intuitive thinking for the moral domain.

In discussing the reliability of intuitive judgements, psychologists enter the domain of epistemology. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy. There is a continuing debate in epistemology on the epistemic value of (moral) intuitions. These discussions might help us to get more clarity in the epistemic value of intuitive moral judgements. However, it is said that psychological intuitionism is quite different from philosophical intuitionism. Philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, for example, says that (philosophical) moral intuitionism is openly normative and epistemic. It specifies when moral beliefs are justified. He regards Haidt's intuitionism as a descriptive psychological theory about how moral beliefs are formed. Psychological intuitionism and moral intuitionism are independent positions (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, 50). I agree with Sinnott-Armstrong that psychological intuitionism and moral intuitionism are different kinds of theories. But it may still be possible that the mental states of psychological intuitive moral judgements are similar to the mental states to which the epistemic concept of moral intuition refers. Let us first have a look at the epistemological concept of intuition.

Epistemologists distinguish between inferential and non-inferential justification. Inferential reasoning is premise based; its conclusion is inferentially grounded on its premises. Non-inferential justification is nonlinear and in a certain sense global. It yields conclusions based on reflection rather than inference (Audi 2004, 98). According to many epistemologists, (moral) intuitions do not need inferential justification. In recent literature on moral epistemology, there are two prominent views on intuition. On the view defended by the philosophers Robert Audi (2004) and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), intuitions as understandings of self-evident propositions also justify these propositions. The understanding of self-evident propositions is sufficient for their justification. On an alternative view defended by Huemer (2005), moral intuitions are *sui generis* seeming states, named initial intellectual seemings. These intellectual seemings are like other seemings (e.g. those based on sensory experience or memory) in the way they justify. Philosopher George Bealer holds the same view. For him, intuition is different from belief: you can believe things that you do not intuit (e.g. that Rome is the capital of Italy), and you can intuit things you do not believe (e.g. the axioms of a naïve set theory) (Bealer 2002, 73). In a recent article, Audi now divides intuitions into those that are doxastic, a kind of belief, and intuitive seemings that are not doxastic but embody a disposition to believe based on a non-inferential impression of truth. Intuitive seemings may also be called non-doxastic intuitions (Audi 2008, 478).

I think that philosopher Matthew Bedke (2008, 255) is right when he says that the self-evidence view is inadequate insofar as it introduces a truth condition on having an intuition at all. However, it goes beyond the scope of this article to take an argued position in the debate between the self-evidence view of intuitions and the seeming state view. In Huemer's view, statements of the form 'it seems to S that p' describe a kind of propositional attitude, different from belief, of which sensory experience, apparent memory, intuition, and introspective awareness are species. He calls this type of mental state an 'appearance'. It is

by virtue of having an appearance with a certain content that one has justification for believing that content (Huemer 2005, 30). Bedke argues that the view that seemings consist in special attitudes towards (propositional) contents does not sufficiently address where to locate the seeming. For any given seeming, he says, one should ask whether it is located in a special *seemingish attitude* taken towards content, whether it is located in the very *content* under consideration, whether it is located somewhere else entirely, perhaps as a phenomenologically salient character that attends the attitude–content pair (which by itself does not make anything seem to be the case), or whether seemings consist in a combination of these options (Bedke 2008, 253 f.).

Bedke argues that the categories of seemings differ in the location of the seeming. In the case of sensory seemings, the contents of the sensory experiences are laden with seemingness. When someone sees a stick placed in water, this person may form the belief that the stick is bent. It is the content of the sensory experience that justifies his belief. In Bedke's view, intellectual seemings present a striking contrast to seemings of sensory experience. Some (but not all) intellectual seemings have to do with competent understanding and application of either a procedural rule or a concept (258 ff.). These seemings differ from those in sensory experiences in that the intellectual seeming is not part of the content. Imagine a heart specialist who, after studying the symptoms and listening to the patient's story, forms the intuition that the patient has a hole in the right valve of his heart. It seems to him that the patient's complaints are caused by this hole. The seeming that the patient that has this heart problem is not part of the content of the proposition. It is the feeling that a judgement is competence-driven that (perhaps partially) constitutes the seeming, where the relevant phenomenal quality attends some relevant attitude–content pair like considering whether *p*, says Bedke (2008, 260). When considering the proposition that the patient's complaints are caused by a hole in the heart, the specialist gets a feeling of appropriateness or veridicality. What justifies, however, the belief that the patient has a hole in the right heart valve? Is it the seeming or the feeling that it is competence-driven? Some elements of this feeling are phenomenological, but the fact of being competence-driven does not fit well into a system of categories in which the seeming is located in content, attitude, or accompanying quality. Therefore, it might be best, remarks Bedke, to think of competence as a kind of successful non-inferential performance that *enables* the extra-justificatory power of an intellectual seeming. This theory retains the view that the seeming itself is justification conferring while acknowledging the epistemic relevance of other factors that must be met for the seeming to confer justification (260).

The difference between moral intuitions and other kinds of intellectual seemings is, according to Bedke, that moral intuitions are not competence-driven (260 ff.). What needs to be there in having a moral intuition is the attitude of consideration towards the proposition with special phenomenological features such as a felt veridicality, appropriateness, familiarity or confidence. The seemingness of substantive moral intuitions is wholly constituted by these features. They do all the epistemic work of justification.

There is more to be said about what justifies moral intuitions, but our examination of the epistemological view on the nature of intuition has progressed far enough to discuss now the relation between the psychological concept of intuitive judgement and the epistemological notion of intuition.

4.   How does the psychological notion of intuition relate to the epistemic notion?

Both philosophers and psychologists use the term 'non-inferential' with regard to intuitions. However, psychologists say that the processes which result in intuitive judgements are

non-inferential, while philosophers speak of the property of intuitions to invoke the sense of non-inferential credibility. Psychologists, according to philosopher Linda Osbeck (1999), are not interested in the role of intuitions as a foundation of knowledge. She may be right, but the lack of interest on the part of psychologists in the role of intuitions as a foundation of knowledge is no argument for denying that they can have this role. Epistemologists may be said to focus on an aspect of intuition that is neglected by psychologists. It might be that intuitions both result from non-inferential processes and evoke a sense of non-inferential credibility.

Psychological intuitive moral judgements result from rapid, non-inferential, and evaluative cognitive processes. I do not think that these judgements *as such* can be described as moral seemings. Imagine that a man, Peter, asks a female friend, Joanne, what she thinks of having sex with animals. Without hesitance she tells him that she finds it immoral and disgusting. Let us assume that she never really thought about sex with animals. She may even be surprised by her vehement judgement. Peter reacts by asking her whether she really finds it immoral. She responds by saying that this is indeed how she thinks about it.

The difference between the initial intuitive judgement and the intuition that is formed while reflecting upon the intuitive judgement can be illuminated by philosopher Karen Jones' (2003) distinction between reason tracking and reason responding. Creatures, Jones says, might track reasons and respond to reasons. Reason trackers are capable of registering reasons and behaving in accordance with them. They need not possess the concept of a reason or have a self-concept. Non-human animals may be seen as reason trackers. When a bird flees after hearing the warning signal of a member of the same species, it registered a reason to flee and behaved accordingly. Referring to the psychologist Joseph LeDoux (1996), Jones (2003, 185) says that even brain-damaged persons who are unable to form long-term memories can have functioning fear systems that enable affective learning that 'tracks' their practical reasons without generating higher-level understanding of that tracking.[3] Reason responders are capable of deliberative reasoning. They can guide their actions via reasons understood as reasons. According to Jones, persons are both reason trackers and reason responders. Jones assigns the function of tracking reasons to emotions and the affective systems. I would prefer to say that reason tracking is the function of the unconscious, of the intuitive processes. Normal persons are not only able to become aware of the reasons tracked by the intuitive system, they can also reflect on these reasons. In reflecting upon the reason tracked by an intuitive moral judgement, a person may come to the justifying force of that reason. The intuitive judgement then becomes an intuition as understood by epistemologists.

I assume that Haidt would regard my fictitious case as a nice example of dumbfounding. Many people, he says, are unable to provide reasons for their intuitive judgements. According to him, the phenomenon of dumbfounding proves that intuitive judgements do not result from inferential processes. The observation that they are unable to provide reasons does not bring subjects to drop the judgement, they may still cling to it. If they do come with reasons, they are confabulated – constructed post hoc (Haidt 2001, 822 ff.). The interpretation I propose is that subjects, after reflecting on their intuitive judgement, may come to endorse the beliefs tracked by this judgement. They may come to see that they cannot further justify, and need not further justify, these beliefs. Reflection on the intuitive judgement then evokes a sense of non-inferential credibility.[4] Reflection on intuitive judgements needs not always result in a sense of non-inferential credibility, maybe only in a minority of cases. In other cases, people might come to realise that an intuitive moral judgement is only a gut feeling that should be discarded.

I am not the first to propose that intuitive moral judgements are seemings. Psychologist Jennifer Wright (2006, 53–4) made the same suggestion in her study:

> [. . .] it seems reasonable to conclude the following: moral intuition (insofar as it is intuition) is a rapid, non-inferential, and evaluative cognitive process that results in a 'seeming' of the rightness/wrongness (goodness/badness, kindness/cruelty, etc.) of a particular act, object, event, person, or situation. It is tightly (if not, in at least some cases, necessarily) connected to moral emotions: *seemings* are usually accompanied by (or accompany) *feelings*.

5.   The justificatory force of moral intuitions

Bedke's account of the different locations of seemingness in the diverse categories of seemings is an improvement compared with Huemer's theory. If Bedke is right in saying that moral intuitions are not competence-driven, all the epistemic work of justification is done by their special phenomenological features such as a felt veridicality, appropriateness, familiarity or confidence. Bedke's argument is that genuine moral disagreement is possible. If one party fails to competently apply moral concepts, there cannot be a genuine disagreement. But if two parties disagree about what is right and wrong without thinking that the other is unable to grasp moral concepts and to apply them competently, there is genuine disagreement. Bedke concedes that competence might be relevant for the application of thicker moral concepts, such as torture and cruelty, but he thinks that this competence only regards applying the descriptive criteria of thick concepts (262). I do not agree with him. Thick moral concepts are open texture concepts. This means that it is impossible to spell out in advance the conditions for their correct application in all possible cases. The application of a thick concept always requires a decision which is based on the interpretation of that concept's rationale. The application of a concept is regulated by its rationale. It does not suffice for deciding whether an action is torture to identify all the descriptive features of that action. One needs to know which features are relevant, and this requires knowledge of that concept's rationale (Kovesi 1967; Brennan 1977). Since the descriptive and the evaluative aspect of thick moral concepts cannot be separated, it makes no sense to say that competence only regards applying the descriptive criteria of these concepts. This view on the relation between the descriptive and evaluative aspects of moral concepts does not preclude the existence of genuine moral disagreement, as Bedke suggests. If John and Jim disagree about whether sleep deprivation is a kind of torture, while they agree on the descriptive features of sleep deprivation, they need not conclude that the other is unable to competently apply the moral concept of torture. They may come to the insight that they have a different view on the rationale of the concept. In my view, we can safely conclude that moral seemings are no less competence-driven than other intellectual seemings.[5]

If moral seemings are competence-driven, Bedke's statement that competence as a kind of successful non-inferential performance *enables* the extra-justificatory power of an intellectual seeming, also applies to moral seemings. When stating that reliability of intellectual seemings as such does not justify, but enables the phenomenological features to confer justification, Bedke refers to the justificatory theory of reliabilism. Reliabilism allows for the possibility of reliable processes that do not involve inferring some beliefs from others (see also Shafer-Landau 2003, 273). Here, we are again confronted by the same problem that gave us cause for turning from psychology to philosophy: the reliability of the source of intuitive judgements. It appears that we cannot pass by the question why, as philosopher John Symons states, a proposition's having the property

of being favoured by intuition counts as a reason to believe that it is true? Symons (2008, 71) continues saying that:

> [...] we could only reasonably believe that this property is a guide to truth by virtue of some additional set of propositions concerning the reliability and nature of the faculty of intuition or common sense. [...] Distinguishing between the truth value of a proposition and its relation to intuition is certainly not equivalent to denying the value of intuition in philosophical investigation or justification. Rather, the distinction is a necessary step in the search for a reasonable account of why (and when) we ought to heed intuition.[6]

But I have already concluded in section 2 that we perhaps may assume, but cannot prove, that in complex cases intuitive thinking leads to more reliable moral judgements than reasoned thinking. Shafer-Landau also admits that he has no answer to the question whether the processes that we think are reliable really are. He suggests a role for moral exemplars but is aware that in a pluralistic society we will persistently disagree about who they are (2003, 293 ff.).

Although we cannot make further progress in identifying reliable processes, we might be able to identify factors that either increase or decrease the reliability of intuitive moral judgements and thereby their non-inferential credibility. We do not need to have a complete grasp on all the constituents of subjective well-being to know that coping ability plays an important role. Many of the authors (Hogarth 2001, 2002; Dijksterhuis and Nordgren 2006; Woodward and Allman 2007) hold the opinion that experience, expertise, or competence increase the reliability of intuitive (moral) judgements. I will discuss the role of expertise in section 5.1. The philosopher who is best known for his critique on the non-inferential credibility is Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. His views are discussed in section 5.2.

5.1 *Intuitive moral judgements as expert judgements*

Following philosopher Jonathan Kvanvig (1986), I distinguish between process reliabilism and personal reliabilism. I have a friend who is good at bird watching. If he spots a bird flying high in the sky and believes it is a hawk, I have reasons to believe that his belief is justified, due to his dependability as an observer. This is personal reliabilism. Suppose that he did not have his binoculars with him and borrowed mine, which I know to have serious deviations – a fact unknown to him – in that case I have reasons to doubt whether his belief is justified. This is process reliabilism. Of course, we cannot separate process reliabilism from personal reliabilism. But it is evident that, no matter the instruments they use, experts are better at identifying birds than non-experts. The well-known theory of moral expertise of the philosopher Hubert and the engineer Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) explains what moral expertise is and how it is acquired.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus suggest that the process of acquisition of what they call ethical skills might follow the same course as the acquisition of practical skills such as driving and playing chess. They distinguish between five stages of skill acquisition. In the first stage, that of the *novice*, the instruction process begins with the instructor decomposing the task environment into context-free features which the beginner can recognise without the benefit of experience. The beginner is then given rules for determining actions on the basis of these features, like a computer following a programme (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 232). The second stage is that of the *advanced beginner*. As the novice gains experience through actually coping with real situations, he begins to note, or an instructor points out, perspicuous examples of meaningful additional components of the situation. Having seen a sufficient number of examples, the student learns to recognise them. Instructional

maxims now can refer to these new *situational aspects* (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 233).[7] In the third stage, that of *competence*, the increasing experience makes the number of features and aspects to be taken into account overwhelming. To cope with this information explosion, the performer learns to adopt a hierarchical view of decision-making. He chooses a plan, goal, or perspective that organises the situation. By examining only the small set of features and aspects that are relevant given that plan, the performer can simplify and improve his performance. Choosing a plan, goal, or perspective is no simple matter for the competent performer. Nobody gives him any rules for how to choose a perspective, so that he has to make up rules which he then adopts or discards in various situations depending on how they work out. This procedure is frustrating, however, since each rule works on some occasions and fails on others, and no set of objective features and aspects correlates strongly with these successes and failures. Nonetheless, the choice is unavoidable (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 233 f.). The fourth stage is that of *proficiency*. Having experienced many emotion-laden situations, having chosen plans in each, and having obtained vivid, emotional demonstrations of the adequacy or inadequacy of the plan, the performer involved in the world of the skill, 'notices', or 'is struck by' a certain plan, goal or perspective. The spell of involvement is no longer broken by detached conscious planning (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 234). When the last stage, that of *expertise*, is reached, the proficient performer, *sees* what needs to be done, but must *decide* how to do it. With enough experience in a variety of situations, all seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the proficient performer seems to gradually divide the class of situations into subclasses, each of which share the same decision, action or tactic. This allows an immediate intuitive response to each situation (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 235).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus claim that their theory of expertise acquisition is an alternative to psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development that regards moral development as a kind of cognitive development. They use the term 'expert' to refer to the tacit knowledge and the skills that we need in order to operate in domains of everyday life. A moral expert is someone who has had a normal, successful moral education. Thus, anyone who has had a normal moral education will have intuitive moral judgements for which he can claim non-inferential credibility. Of course, we often do not know whether a particular person has had a normal, successful education. Besides that, he may have been raised within a moral tradition that we do not share. And assuming that he has had a successful moral education with our own moral tradition, we still may not know his level of moral competence. Notwithstanding that, there are persons whom we consider to be 'moral exemplars' (Colby and Damon 1992). We are more inclined to recognise the justificatory force of their moral intuitions than those of ordinary moral persons.

In the eyes of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, having a driving licence, I am an expert in driving cars. But my skills in driving a car cannot be compared with those of a Formula I racer.[8] Ordinary morally competent people may be able to handle moral issues that arise in everyday moral life, but they need additional education and training to be able to deal with more complex issues, for example, issues arising in their professional life, or with complex issues that confront active citizens who participate in political life. We will have to distinguish between the general moral expertise of morally competent persons and the more specialised moral expertise of professionals and other people involved in particular moral practices.[9]

5.2 *Doubts about the non-inferential credibility of intuitive moral judgements*

Some studies suggest that the processes that result in our beliefs often are subject to distorting influences. Referring to these studies, Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, 2008) attacks moral

intuitionism. In his view, these studies show that we cannot claim non-inferential justification for our moral intuitions. If he is right, we can never be *prima facie* epistemically justified in trusting our intuitive moral judgements.

In his 2006 article, Sinnott-Armstrong formulates five general 'principles of epistemic need' which he later applies to moral beliefs. Confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the believer is partial (principle 1), when people disagree with no independent reason to prefer one belief or believer to the other (principle 2), when the believer is emotional in a way that clouds judgement (principle 3), when the circumstances are conducive to illusion (principle 4), and when the belief arises from an unreliable or disreputable source (principle 5). We cannot be justified in assuming that any of us is ever fully impartial, says Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, 348). Partiality is so common in the area of morality and so difficult to discover in ourselves, that it creates a need for confirmation of moral beliefs according to principle 1. Some moral disagreements can be explained by the fact that people use different concepts and have different non-moral beliefs. Straightening out our concepts and non-moral beliefs seems unlikely to solve all apparent moral disagreements, according to Sinnott-Armstrong. Principle 2 says that this also creates a need for confirmation (2006, 350). In spite of the absence of an agreement on the role of emotions in moral judgements, it can hardly be disputed that partiality influences moral judgements and that moral disagreements are often intractable. Sinnott-Armstrong refers to a number of studies that indicate that emotions, indeed, can cloud moral judgements, among which are the studies of philosopher Josuah Greene et al.

Greene *cum suis* have become famous by research in which they made fMRI scans of the brain activity of research subjects while they were responding to a series of personal and impersonal moral dilemmas as well as to non-moral dilemmas all of which involved complex narratives (Greene et al. 2004). The trolley problem is an example of an impersonal dilemma, while the footbridge dilemma is an example of a personal moral dilemma.[10] Greene et al. found that responding to personal moral dilemmas, when compared with impersonal and non-moral dilemmas, produced increased activity in areas associated with social/emotional processing: medial frontal gyrus, posterior cingulated gyrus, and bilateral superior temporal sulcus (STS). In contrast, impersonal and non-moral dilemmas when compared with personal moral dilemmas produced increased activity in areas associated with working memory: dorsolateral prefrontal and parietal areas (Greene et al. 2001). The differences in these intuitive responses are due to differences in the emotional pull of situations that involve bringing about someone's death personally, in a direct way, and causing his death at a distance, and in a way, less personal. Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, 351) suggests that the increased activity in brain areas associated with social/emotional processing might indicate that, when confronted with personal dilemmas, emotions block subjects from considering the many factors in these cases. He finds additional evidence in Wheatley and Haidt (2005). They gave subjects the post-hypnotic suggestion that they would feel a pang of disgust whenever they saw either the word 'take' or the word 'often'. The subjects were later asked to make moral judgements about six stories designed to elicit mild to moderate disgust. It turned out that when a story contained one of these words, subjects were more likely to express stronger condemnation of acts in the story. The presence of these words in stories elicits feelings of disgust which influence the moral judgements on acts described in the story. Such an influence is irrational. That is why Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that the emotion of disgust clouds the judgement. Because independently caused emotions can distort moral beliefs, believers need confirmation in order to be justified in holding their moral beliefs (2006, 352).

Confirmation is also needed, says Sinnott-Armstrong, when the circumstances are conducive to illusion. He mentions three kinds of illusions. The first one occurs when

appearances and beliefs depend on context. Here, he refers to Unger (1996, 88–94) who found out that the order in which options are presented affects beliefs about whether an option is morally wrong. People's moral beliefs about a certain option depend on whether that option is presented as part of a pair or, instead, as part of a series of options that includes additional options intermediate between the original pair. The second kind of illusions arises from overgeneralisations. Illusions caused by heuristics are the third kind. However, it is not clear why he makes a distinction between these two kinds, while the studies he refers to all relate to problems caused by the use of heuristics. Moral heuristics often represent generalisations from a range of problems for which they are well-suited. According to the psychologist Jonathan Baron (1994) and the philosopher Cas Sunstein (2005) moral heuristics become a problem when they are wrenched out of context and treated as freestanding or universal principles, applicable to situations in which their justifications no longer operate. A heuristic which Sunstein suggests is 'Do not play God' or, in secular terms, 'Do no tamper with nature'. He thinks that this heuristic might explain the wide-spread repugnance against, for example, cloning.

In addition to the three kinds of illusion that we have discussed, Sinnott-Armstrong mentions the influence of framing effects. He discusses framing effects more extensively in Sinnott-Armstrong (2008). The kind of framing effects he has in mind are effects that wording and context have on moral intuitions. A person's belief is subject to a *word* framing effect when whether the person holds the belief depends on which words are used to describe what the belief is about. If I want my wife to believe that I did not drink too much wine, and she does believe me when I say that the bottle is still half full, but does not believe me when I say that the bottle is now half empty, then her belief is subject to a word framing effect. My daughter has a boyfriend from Ecuador. If you see them together on a photograph, you might think she is tall. But if you see her among a group of young Dutch adults of the same age, you would say she is short. In this case, the belief about my daughter's height is subject to a *context* framing effect. A special kind of context framing effect involves *order*. If you see my daughter amidst a group of female basketball players first, and besides her boyfriend next, you will still consider her small. This is because of the framing of the first impression. Sinnott-Armstrong reviews a number of studies of the influence of framing effects on moral beliefs. Psychologists Tversky and Kahneman (1981) have shown that in choosing between options involving risks, subjects were risk averse when results were described in positive terms (such as 'lives saved') but risk seeking when results were described in negative terms (such as 'lives lost' or 'deaths'). If three children are in danger of drowning, and I have to choose between saving two children who are close together or the child a hundred yards to the right, most people will find that I have to save the two. But if I must choose between saving a heavy child that desperately clings to me, or saving two smaller children after prying the heavy child away from me, many, perhaps most people will say that I am not justified in letting the heavy child drown. The psychologists Lewis Petrinovich and Patrick O'Neill (1996) found framing effects in various descriptions of the trolley problem. They asked 387 students in one class and 60 students in another class how strongly they agreed or disagreed with given alternatives in 21 variations of the trolley case. The trick lay in the wording. Half of the questionnaires used 'kill' wordings so that subjects faced a choice between (1) 'throw the switch which will result in the death of the one innocent person on the side track' and (2) 'do nothing which will result in the death of the five innocent people'. The other half of the questionnaires used 'save' wordings, so that subjects faced a choice between (1*) 'throw the switch which will result in the five innocent people on the main track being saved' and (2*) 'do nothing which will

result in the one innocent person being saved'. These wordings do not change the facts of the case, which were described identically before the question was posed. The conclusion Petrinovich and O'Neill drew from their study is: 'Participants were likely to agree more strongly with almost any statement worded to Save than one worded to Kill'. Out of 40 relevant questions, 39 differences were significant. The effects were also not shallow: 'The wording effect ... accounted for as much as one-quarter of the total variance, and on average accounted for almost one-tenth when each individual question was considered'. Moreover, wording affected not only strength of agreement (whether a subject agreed slightly or moderately) but also whether subjects agreed or disagreed: ' [...] the Save wording resulted in a greater likelihood that people would absolutely agree' (Petrinovich and O'Neill 1996, 152).

Sinnott-Armstrong's last principle of epistemic need holds that confirmation is needed when the belief arises from an unreliable or disreputable source. The origins of moral beliefs might be problematic in two ways. First, moral beliefs might be caused by factors that are unrelated to the truth of those beliefs. Second, the origins of moral beliefs might be immoral according to those beliefs. For example, moral beliefs may reflect the interests of the dominant social class while at the same time condemning the very power that leads to these beliefs, as is argued by Nietzsche with regard to Christian morality (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 356).

Sinnott-Armstrong contends that there are so many factors that might distort moral beliefs that no one can ever claim that his intuitions are non-inferentially justified. Moral intuitions are always in need of confirmation. It might be possible to discuss the validity of the conclusions he draws from the empirical studies,[11] but I will focus on whether we can get control of the distorting influences. Psychologists have conducted research on debiasing strategies that show that our judgements and actions need not be determined by our prejudices and stereotypes (Arkes 1991; Wilson and Brekke 1994). Wilson and Brekke reviewed studies on attempts at reducing biases in information processing and judgement. The results of these attempts are ambiguous. Some of these studies have shown that awareness of biases – Wilson and Brekke speak of 'mental contaminations' – leads to their elimination; others have shown that awareness leads to undercorrection because people adjust insufficiently; and yet others have indicated that awareness causes people to adjust too much, resulting in overcorrection; some have shown that awareness does not cause people to adjust their responses (1994, 130).

Analysing these studies, Wilson and Brekke conclude that three steps are necessary for successful debiasing. First, an increasing awareness of biases. The success of attempts at increasing people's awareness of biases depends in part on the extent to which researchers succeed in convincing the research participants that their judgements, indeed, are open to bias. Secondly, the studies reveal that *awareness* of potential bias is not sufficient. People must also be motivated to correct for it. Thirdly, some of the studies indicate that even when people are aware that information can bias them and are motivated to resist that bias, they adjust their response either too much or too little or not at all.

These studies show that a person's stereotypes and prejudices need not determine his judgements. Subjects can become aware of influences that distort their moral beliefs and adjust their beliefs, if necessary. In my view, subjects are *pro tanto* justified in claiming non-inferential justification for their intuitions if they can make it clear that they are aware of influences that can distort their beliefs and have reconsidered their intuitions in the light of that. They are only *pro tanto* justified because they can always be confronted with evidence of distorting influences which have escaped their attention.

6. Conclusion

Psychologists argue that the social intuitions of experienced persons are more reliable in complex situations than their reasoned judgements. Empirical research into the reliability of moral intuitions is difficult if not impossible since we do not know what the right criteria are for evaluating our judgements and decisions. I showed that subjects can come to conclude that the beliefs expressed in their intuitive judgements evoke a sense of non-inferential credibility. If one regards moral subjects as experts in the moral domain, the claim that their moral intuitions have non-inferential credibility gains plausibility. I also argued that studies on the influence of biases and framing effects undermine the non-inferential credibility of intuitive moral judgements. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, these studies should lead to the conclusion that it is not justified to claim non-inferential credibility for intuitive moral judgements. In my opinion, this conclusion is too drastic. Knowing that their intuitive moral judgements may be subject to distorting influences, experienced moral subjects – 'moral experts' – will be keen on finding them. Moral subjects are *pro tanto* justified in claiming non-inferential justification for their intuitions if they can make clear that they are aware of influences that can distort their beliefs and are willing to reconsider their intuitions when there is evidence of these influences.

Notes

1. I use the terms interchangeably.
2. I discuss (the critique on) Haidt's views in Musschenga (2008).
3. LeDoux (1996) reports the case of a woman who, though unable to recognise her doctors from one meeting to the next, was able to learn not to shake hands with a doctor who had previously pricked her with a tack concealed in his palm.
4. An anonymous referee asked whether this process of reflection is not a transition from one set of beliefs to another. If someone asks me, for example, whether I really think that mass murderers should get the death penalty, she does not ask for a justification. She wants to know whether this opinion is compatible with the person I am and want to be. She wants me to give a narrative explanation, not a justification.
5. What about thin concepts such as 'good' versus 'bad', 'right' versus 'wrong'? In my view, moral judgements are based on principles. A principle states the reason why an action or state of affairs is good or bad, right or wrong. A principle is either the formal element of an already existing thick moral concept, or to the formal element that could be the formal element of such a notion. Here, I follow Kovesi (1967, 109 f.).
6. Shafer-Landau (2003, 301) also finds that a fully worked-out version of moral reliabilism requires a nuanced account of the processes that are genuinely reliable.
7. Dreyfus and Dreyfus use the terms *maxims* and *aspects* to differentiate this form of instruction from the one in the first stage, where strict *rules* were given as to how to respond to context-free *features*. Since maxims are phrased in terms of aspects they already presuppose experience in the skill domain (233).
8. This point is nicely formulated by Selinger and Crease (2002, 258): 'We do not call people who are merely ambulatory or verbal "expert" walkers or talkers, but reserve the adjective for those who undergo special training, give professional advice, etc.'.
9. In Musschenga (2010), I argue in more detail that judgements in specialised domains such as health care require expertise that goes beyond the general moral competence of morally mature persons.
10. This is the description of the classic trolley problem:
    A trolley is hurtling down the tracks. There are five innocent people on the track ahead of the trolley, and they will be killed if the trolley continues to go straight ahead. There is a spur of track leading off to the side. There is one innocent person on that spur. The brakes of the trolley have failed and there is a switch that can be activated to cause the trolley to go to the side track. You are an innocent bystander (i.e. not an employee of the railroad, etc.). You can throw the switch, saving five innocent people, which will result in the death of the one innocent

person on the side track. What would you do?

And this is the footbridge variant:

A trolley threatens to kill five people. You are standing next to a large stranger on a footbridge spanning the tracks, in between the oncoming trolley and the hapless five. The only way to save them is to push the stranger over the bridge onto the tracks below. He will die if you do this, but his body will stop the trolley from reaching the others. Should you save the five others by pushing the stranger to his death? Contrary to the response to the trolley problem, most people say no.

11. See Smith (2010) for a critique of Sinnott-Armstrong's arguments against moral intuitionism.

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