

Article

# Evaluating the Dependability of Intuitive Processes in Moral Judgement

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**Abstract:** The reliability of moral intuition as a source of ethical knowledge has been a subject of significant philosophical debate, particularly regarding its limitations. These limitations arise primarily from two factors: disagreement and psychological influence. For example, the “Trolley Problem” presents a stark contrast between utilitarian and deontological perspectives, where the former advocates for the greater good for the greatest number, and the latter insists on adherence to moral rules, regardless of consequences. This fundamental divergence in moral intuitions challenges the universality of such judgements, as what one person may feel intuitively is morally right, another might deem wrong. Furthermore, psychological influences, including cognitive biases and emotional factors, play a significant role in shaping moral intuitions often leading to inconsistent or unreliable unethical judgements even when the scenarios are fundamentally similar. Factors such as personal experiences, societal influences, and unconscious biases can skew one’s intuitive response creating discrepancies in moral decision-making that undermine the reliability of intuition as a sole guide on ethics. While moral intuition may serve as an effective tool for understanding simple, self-evident ethical principles, it often proves inadequate when confronted with complex moral dilemmas that require nuanced deliberation. In contrast, moral reasoning—through its emphasis on critical evaluation, rational analysis, and systematic reflection—provides a more dependable approach to navigating such dilemmas.

**Keywords:** moral intuition; ethical knowledge; moral reasoning; moral dilemma; decision-making; disagreement; psychological influence; moral judgement

## 1. Introduction

There are good reasons to trust intuition such that our first instinct towards a moral proposition may be assumed correct until proven otherwise. However, I argue that moral intuitions can only be trusted for knowledge of various simple self-evident moral principles, such as pleasure is better than pain, and cannot be relied upon in complex dilemmas. On the other hand, moral reasoning has a larger scope than moral intuition as it can also be applied to more complex dilemmas. This essay will draw its conclusions by discussing two main points: An argument stemming from disagreement as well as the influence of morally irrelevant psychological factors on moral intuition.

There are two conceptions of intuition: an everyday conception as well as a philosophical or technical conception. By ‘intuition’, we ordinarily mean a natural, gut feeling which is usually instinctive. In one technical definition, Richard Price, an 18th century intuitionist philosopher, states, “Intuition is immediate apprehension by ... understanding” (Price, 1758/1969). Simply put, Price conveys that intuition is the ability to understand (as opposed to sense) instantaneously, without conscious reasoning. Therefore, moral intuition is the natural feeling or instinct relied upon when weighing principles, values, and decisions.

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Moral intuitionism is a sophisticated philosophical theory. This position includes ideas that intuitions give us moral knowledge and that the moral propositions we intuit are self-evident. A self-evident proposition is one which is known to be true by its own nature, without the need for proof as it already comes with its own evidence (Locke 1969, 139). Infallibility refers to the idea that these truths are certain and in no way can be mistaken. Morals are principles and values of what is right and wrong in our society. Morals can vary from extremely complex ones, e.g. "America was right to use nuclear weapons", to simple instances such as "Being happy is good". An argument emphasized by critics of intuitionism stems from the idea of disagreement. The argument claims that we cannot trust our intuitions because intuitions vary vastly between different people (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006). If there is disagreement, then intuitions cannot be reliable.

## 2. Examining the Argument from Disagreement

People have significantly different moral intuitions, and we cannot determine whose intuition is right or wrong. As philosopher G. E. Moore claimed, "every way in which it is possible to cognize a true proposition, it is also to grasp a false one" (1903/1993, 36). An example in which people have different intuitions for the right course of action is the "Trolley Problem". This problem sets forth two sides: utilitarianism and deontology. The utilitarian side states that pushing the switch to divert the trolley to kill one person instead of five maximizes lives saved and therefore happiness. By contrast, deontology emphasizes the morality of the actions themselves instead of the outcome, therefore concluding that you should not end a life regardless of whether this saves lives in the long-run. The two sides disagree on what to do and what is moral in this situation. Therefore, the existence of a disagreement between intuitions creates the problem of whose intuition is morally right and whose is morally wrong because they both cannot be right. As English philosopher Henry Sidgwick suggests, if there is significant disagreement about the truth of a moral proposition, then that moral proposition cannot be self-evident. This brings into doubt the existence of self-evident and infallible truths as well as moral intuitionism as a whole.

Since there is no universal agreement on any moral proposition, self-evident and infallible moral propositions do not exist. Intuitions, therefore, cannot be self-evident.

One claim intuitionists propose against the argument of disagreement is that the only self-evident and infallible moral intuitions concern simple moral propositions. Because of this, the moral propositions in which moral intuition can be trusted are simple ones such as, "It is wrong to kill innocents", "Pain is worse than pleasure", and "Being happy contributes to a good life".

Intuitionists may argue that we only intuit basic moral truths, which the majority of humankind agrees upon, and that more complex propositions involve intuition as well as surrounding factors that result in disagreement. Circling back to the introduction, of whether America was right to use nuclear weapons describes a complex moral dilemma. The complexity of weighing killing innocents to prevent a long-term potential of harm is too extensive for moral intuition to decide simply, resulting in a conclusion in which moral intuition's scope is not extensive enough to cover complex moral dilemmas. In such cases, we must defer to moral reasoning to decide what to do.

Intuitionists refute the argument of disagreement by claiming that it can be completely accounted for as a lack of agreement among the facts surrounding the moral proposition and not the actual moral values. There are two types of facts: non-moral facts and moral facts. A non-moral fact lies in a domain where there is no reference to right or wrong. On the other hand, moral facts are, 'action-guiding' meaning that they are values or principles that suggest what we should do. For instance, a moral proposition states that pain is bad. To give an example of how intuitionists account for apparent moral disagreement, two people might disagree on the moral fact about whether it is permissible to boil lobsters alive just because they disagree over whether lobsters can feel pain or not; they both agree

that it is wrong to cause pain (Stratton-Lake 2020). A further illustration of the disagreement of non-moral facts can be shown through the argument of abortion. Person 1 states that abortion is wrong. Person 2 says that abortion is permissible. Both believe that killing living beings is wrong. This debate suggests that the disagreement is over the non-moral fact of whether a fetus is alive rather than the moral fact of whether killing living beings is wrong or permissible. Since the foundation of moral disagreement is about non-moral facts and not about moral values, intuitionists believe that disagreement concerns only on nonmoral facts, and ultimately, the moral facts are agreed upon.

However, there are cases that intuitionists cannot resolve. In the Trolley Problem, all the nonmoral facts are agreed upon (e.g. if the switch is pulled, one person is killed to save five people and if the switch is not pulled, five people die). Therefore, the disagreement is over the moral values between the perspectives of utilitarianism and deontology and not the non-moral facts. This means that the intuitionist's refutation to the disagreement argument no longer stands. Even in a case like the Trolley Problem, where all the non-moral facts are agreed upon, the moral values often differ between each individual. Moral values will always be disagreed upon because of the idea that moral values are subjective. Unlike the non-moral facts which, most of the time, can be agreed upon or proven by science, moral values cannot be all agreed upon because of their subjectivity. Despite the intuitionist's refutation to the argument of disagreement, the argument still maintains its predominance.

### 3. Influence of Psychological Factors

Additionally, moral intuition is influenced by arbitrary psychological effects rather than the moral values themselves. Returning to the Trolley Problem, besides the original problem with the switch, we can add a different circumstance such as the following.

Bridge: A large man stands on a bridge over the track. If you pushed him off the bridge and onto the track he would be killed. But he would change the course of the trolley so the five people on the track would be saved.

I maintain that these two situations are morally equivalent simply because you are killing one person to save the other five. Regardless, in many cases, people have intuitions that are not equivalent for both situations: in the switch case people typically choose to pull the switch to save the five people whereas in the bridge case, people typically choose to not push the man over the bridge (Andow 2018, 121).

The fact that intuitions differ over morally equivalent cases shows that intuitions are unreliable. Stated in premise-conclusion form, the argument is as follows:

- P1. The switch and bridge cases are morally equivalent.
- P2. If our intuitions are reliable, they would be equivalent for morally equivalent cases.
- P3. But, our intuitions are not equivalent for both morally equivalent cases.
- C. Therefore, our intuitions are not reliable.

An intuitionist might challenge P1 by arguing that the two cases are not morally equivalent. The bridge case involves us purposefully intending for someone to be killed, as it is the death of the large man that will stop the trolley. Contrastingly, in the case of the switch, the death of one person is not a requirement for saving the five lives. Thus, we do not intend to kill one person although we predict this to be a consequence. Because these cases are in the eyes of an intuitionist morally inequivalent (one involves the intention to kill, and the other just involves us knowing that we will kill without directly intending to), it is understandable to have differing intuitions about them. Indeed some of these points are valid, but let us consider the trapdoor variation of the trolley problem.

Trapdoor: A man stands on the bridge over the track. If he fell onto the track he would be killed but would divert the trolley thus saving the five people on the track. He is standing on a trap door that would open and drop him onto the track if you pulled a lever.

This is morally equivalent to the bridge case in that we are intending the death of one person, but individuals tend to think that it is permissible to save the five people in the trap door yet not in the bridge case (Greene et al. 2009). So, really, what explains the differing moral intuitions? As stated by Sinnott-Armstrong, many of our beliefs are false because of the bias, partiality, emotions, as well as disagreement clouding our judgment. Therefore, many individuals can only “justify” their difference of choice by reference to the fact that, in the bridge case, we must get “up close and personal” to push the large man (Singer, 2005). Nevertheless, this is a morally irrelevant factor and a mere psychological bias. Undoubtedly, this shows a clear example of how morally irrelevant biases influence intuitions. Therefore, this example of psychological effects demonstrates that our moral intuitions are affected by irrelevant considerations that have nothing to do with moral value. Hence, these considerations cause moral intuitions to be arbitrary and untrustworthy.

#### 4. Conclusion

On a larger scale, the ability to approach moral decisions with rational analysis allows us to create a more just and fair society. Thinking thoroughly about the decisions we make promotes ethical behavior, creates more equitable systems, and addresses complex moral decisions wisely. It is important to acknowledge that moral intuition can be best trusted under simple cases; its limitations arrive when approached with complex problems. Furthermore, we must not ignore the argument that stems from disagreement which describes how basic intuitions vary among individuals, proving that intuitions about complex moral dilemmas cannot be trusted. Ultimately, we return to the two main premises in this essay: there can be, on occasion, good reasons to trust intuition, but its lack of trustworthiness and accuracy outweighs its utility. Tempting as it might be of letting mere instinct guide us; only through conscious and careful reasoning do we reach the best outcomes in the greatest number of cases.

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