

Article

A Kantian Analysis of the Fallibility of Moral Intuition

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Abstract: This study evaluates the reliability of moral intuition in ethical reasoning, juxtaposing its spontaneous, subjective nature against the universal, rational framework of Kantian morality. Drawing on perspectives from ethical intuitionism, empirical psychology, and Kantian philosophy, it examines how moral intuitions are shaped by experience, susceptible to external influences, and prone to inconsistency. Through analyses of moral dilemmas, including the trolley problem and the impact of framing effects, the investigation highlights the variability of intuition. In contrast, Kant's categorical imperative establishes a priori, universal principles as the foundation of ethical truth, rejecting intuition as a dependable moral guide. While intuition may often align with moral outcomes, its inherent susceptibility to error undermines its credibility. Conversely, reasoned deliberations should be advocated as the path to achieving moral certainty.

Keywords: kantian morality; ethical intuition; empiricism; rationality; a priori; categorical imperative; universality

1. Introduction

Among the ethical intuitionists of the 18th century, Richard Price (1758) most prominently defined intuition as "immediate apprehension by the understanding," differentiating it from both reason and sentiments (Stratton-Lake 2020). Terence Cuneo (2020) described moral intuition as "a moral judgement that is non-inferential and spontaneous." Jonathan Haidt (2001) provides a similar psychological definition of "the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment...without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion." Despite the nuanced epistemology, all interpretations agree that intuition is immediate, spontaneous, and not rationally deduced.

2. Empiricism in Intuition

Kant (1785) implies the emotionality of intuition in his groundwork, where he contended, "This difference is intended to introduce a certain analogy that will bring an idea of reason closer to intuition and thus nearer to feeling." By placing reason on one end of the spectrum and feeling and intuition on the other, Kant suggests one of two possibilities. If Kant positioned intuition between reason and sentiments, he likely believed that intuition is derived from a combination of both. If intuition were even further from reason than feeling, Kant's idea of intuition could be understood as transcending empirical sentiments, potentially an innate form of knowledge that is entirely or primarily emotional. In both interpretations, his inference makes the significance of emotion in intuition apparent.

Kant's potential assertion of intuition as a mixture of reason and empirical sentiments is grounded in our changing response to situations as we age. Take our perception of violence as an example. As a child, I did not have an inherent aversion to solving problems with my fist. When a friend came over and took my favorite toy, I stole it back; when another child disrespected me or my friends, my first instinct was to fight. I intuitively chose violence to solve the issue since it appealed to my immature self as the most efficient

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method—I could regain my toy or compensate for my dissatisfaction immediately. However, as my parents, school, and experiences cultivated my virtues and moral compass, I became more composed and patient. If a friend steals my phone, I instinctively ask them to return it; when I encounter discrimination, I remind them of their misconduct and attempt to unravel the predicament through communication. Intuition is merely a reflexive response to an ethical dilemma based on one's understanding of morality at the time. The moral canvas is a blank sheet; patterns materialize on it as one unconsciously absorbs the influence of one's encounters and surroundings. Some paint completes the page quickly, while others comprise more sophisticated configurations. Since our perception of morality expands with time, ethical intuition inevitably fluctuates and adapts.

It would be prejudiced, however, to deem intuition as entirely empirical. Our knowledge of simple mathematics, for example, is a priori and can be logically comprehended without physical demonstrations; one does not need two apples to realize that $1+1=2$, or that a triangle has three sides and three internal angles (Kant 1790). Our understanding of these underlying truths is spontaneous and intuitive, allowing us to cognize and respond without experiment or reason.

Nonetheless, a distinction must be made between intuition based on a priori deduction and congenital awareness. Though we don't need to group apples to comprehend fundamental mathematics, one must still identify the existence and connotation of "one" before they logically extrapolate addition—the empirical presence of "one" must be acknowledged before we can conclude $1+1=2$. Therefore, although experiential bases are indispensable in any formation of intuition, reason and a priori perceptions also shape some intuitive responses.

Addressing intuition from multifaceted perspectives, one can ultimately define it as an immediate reaction founded primarily on experience and occasionally a priori instincts.

3. Anomalies of Moral Intuition

A scrutiny of the trolley cases provides more substantiated proof of the capriciousness of ethical intuition. Consider the following situations:

Switch: Five people are tied to a rail track. A trolley will kill all five unless you pull a lever that would divert the trolley onto a different track, killing a person standing on that track.

Bridge: Five people are tied to a rail track. A trolley will kill all five unless you push a person down a bridge, decelerating the trolley to save the five people yet killing the person you pushed down the bridge.

A prerequisite that renders the trolley cases an ethical dilemma is the variance in moral intuition among individuals. Regardless of the specific trolley variation, disputes about the just decision always exist; thus, moral intuitions are subjective.

The reason behind the different intuitions for the switch and bridge case is controversial and still unsettled. Nonetheless, all attempts to resolve the disparity—the juxtaposition of killing one versus saving five, the "doctrine of the double effect" (Stratton-Lake 2020), or extensions of the bridge case that involve physical contact—agree on one principle: our ethical intuitions are influenced by external factors that are irrelevant to the consequence yet distort our perception of morality. In other words, our moral intuitions can vastly diverge with slight adjustments to the premise of the situation.

A contradiction to this claim is that each trolley case must be examined as a distinct ethical subject; although the outcomes remain consistent, other moral factors can alter how the circumstance should be interpreted. Therefore, multiple moral truths can coexist.

Although the counterargument remains ungrounded due to controversies regarding how each example is fundamentally different, we can attain similar findings that reinforce the variability of intuition by focusing on the influence of framing effects. It appears that people are more likely to take action when the interviewer uses the words "saving," and less likely when the word "killing" is used. The order in which the questions were asked

also produced different responses (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006). Phrasing and order do not change the underlying morality of the questions, yet our instincts are still manipulated by these seemingly inconsequential factors. Hence, the phenomenon can only be justified by the inconsistency of moral intuitions.

4. Rationality of Moral Truths

Kant adopts a resolute stance on establishing morality with an a priori origin by distinguishing moral truths from empiricism. As reflected in his groundwork, "The principle of morality... must have an entirely a priori origin, getting none of their commanding authority from the preferences of mankind" (Kant 1785). Besides emphasizing reason in morality, he explicitly conveys how experience obstructs the discovery of truths when he asserts, "If anything empirical were brought in as an ingredient in the principle of morality, it would not only be utterly useless in this role but would also do terrific harm to the purity of morality" (Kant 1785). To clarify, Kant does not reject the importance of physical encounters; he agrees that experience can "yield a maxim that is valid for us," yet such validity, due to inevitable subjectivity and tendencies, cannot be translated into a moral law (Kant 1785).

Beyond empiricism and sentiments, Kant also argues against trusting the innate formations of the human mind. He warns not to "slip into thinking that the reality of [morality] can be derived from the special constitution of human nature" because for all principles that can be recognized as fundamental and unconditional disciplines of behavior, "it has to hold for all rational beings" (Kant 1785).

This concept of unanimous moral laws relates to Kant's core theory in ethics—categorical imperative, "an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must follow" (Johnson & Cureton 2022). Electing categorical imperative as the ultimate standard governing all morality, he indicates two essential attributes of moral truths: strictly universal and logical. The Formula of the Universal Law of Nature testifies to the principle of universality, where Kant instructs us to "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1785). Under the premise that all moral actions should constitute universal law, one can rationally deduce if a behavior is ethical. Suppose a person fabricates a promise to the bank to secure a mortgage they never plan to repay. When examined under The Formula of Universal Law, making false promises is immoral because if everyone were deceitful, it would lead to a communal breach of trust. Without trust, the existence of promises becomes obsolete, leading to a conceptual contradiction. In establishing the categorical imperative, Kant also introduces the Humanity Formula, advising us to never use humanity merely as a means, but also as an end (Kant 1785). While this formula does not suggest moral universality, it mostly perfects the categorical imperative, completing it as a comprehensive and rational theory of morality.

Since the morality of any decision can be discovered by testing it in the categorical imperative, we arrive at a universal system of ethical righteousness governed by pure reason. Thus, it can be logically concluded that moral truths are universal and rational.

Furthermore, all truths must be necessary. If a person living in a rural area has only seen birds in the sky and concludes that all flying objects are birds, their empirical observations would have misled them to the wrong assumption. Experiences inform us only of the surface phenomenon but not the fundamental reality of the observation. Such superficial patterns, nevertheless, do not constitute truths. No matter how many black crows we see, we can't conclude that all crows are black. Similarly, the infinitude of primes cannot be proven before a mathematical proof is formulated. To validate the claim that all crows are black or to prove the infiniteness of primes, we must attain the conclusion through reason exclusively.

By elucidating the imperfections of human experiences and establishing the categorical imperative as the paramount theory of morality, Kant acknowledged the fallibility of

instinctive thoughts. The only intuitions to trust are those derived a priori. Such intuition, however, never pertains to the realm of ethics. As examined in the previous section, moral intuition shifts to our evolving perception of morality as induced by external influences and, therefore, must not be acknowledged as moral laws.

5. Conclusion

Since our instincts are subjective, sentimental, and empirical, while ethical truths are universal, necessary, and derived a priori, moral intuition is untrustworthy. However, this does not insinuate that our intuitions will always yield unethical decisions. There are undeniable benefits to moral intuition. The spontaneous thoughts of a rational being are reliable in most cases, and a person who lives by their intuition could lead a respectable life. Nonetheless, the general acceptability of moral intuitions is insufficient for unconditional trust.

Mistakes are acceptable in life, yet they should always be averted and rectified when offered the opportunity. By reasoning one's decisions through the categorical imperative, one can remove the inconsistencies of moral intuitions and always settle on the morally correct evaluation. While misleading moral intuitions are rare, these mistakes accumulate in a lifetime. Preventing an unethical decision each month could lead to a thousand fewer mistakes in one's life, empowering them as more honorable people. Even if a person has never made a wrong decision through instincts, it still does not qualify moral intuitions as trustworthy—as justified in the previous section, truths must be logically necessary. Just as seeing only black crows fail to prove their darkness as a species, having never been misinformed by intuition is inadequate to authenticate its credibility. As long as moral intuitions are subject to potential error, they should not be trusted.

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