

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Effects of Reliance on Moral Intuition in Social Relationships

Soeun Lee^a

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Moral intuition refers to the subconscious judgments humans make about what is right or wrong, often based on societal experiences. Some scholars question its reliability, arguing that moral intuitions do not always lead to effective decision-making. Others assert that moral intuition is rooted in psychological mechanisms that support social cohesion. This paper reviews the role of moral intuition in fostering healthy social relationships, reflecting on how humans make moral judgments about themselves and others. It also discusses how moral intuitions can justify actions but is also viable to fall into internal contradictions. The paper considers the limitations of relying solely on intuitions in complex moral situations and explores the notion of a balance between moral intuition and reasoning. Introducing the moral foundation theory, this paper emphasizes the underlying core universal values that are embedded into every culture. To account for the dynamic nature of moral intuition, adaptive decision-making is proposed, where individuals refine their decisions over time. Ultimately, individuals achieve the best outcome when balancing both moral intuition and moral reasoning to produce ethical decisions.

Introduction

Philosophers use the term *moral intuition* to depict the application of unconscious reasoning to exhibit a certain type of behavior. Throughout history, many thinkers have proposed various interpretations of conscience, such as it being instinctive or innate. Conversely, others have attempted to depict it as an ideology formed within social and cultural structures. Intuitionists argue that moral perception is direct, free from logical errors or biases, allowing individuals to quickly distinguish between right and wrong. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt believes that “much of our morality is rooted in moral intuitions—quick gut feelings, or affectively laden intuitions.” This assumption that moral intuitions rely on heuristic processes is supported by examples that humans experience through responses concerning day-to-day activities. Erroneous moral propositions, such as inflicting pain on others, are considered to be unjust in themselves without the need for argument or proof. Since moral intuitions arise from past experiences and societal values, they are held as efficacious insofar as they are held with justification. Viewing this ideological theory through a philosophical lens, the argument revolving

^a Soeun Lee is a student at Tenafly High School

around the question of when to trust moral intuitions is derived from the thin line between which reasoning can be deemed as justified. This paper will offer a metacognitive affirmation of how moral intuitions can be held accountable depending on numerous ethical values and driving factors that come into play.

Moral Intuitions

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

The human moral sense is discussed as an organ of great complexity with “quirks that reflect its evolutionary history and its neurobiological foundations” (Pinker, 2008). Morality successfully manifests itself through one’s close conception of their values. John Locke’s magnum opus, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), justifies this by discussing that there is no such thing as innate ideas. It elaborates that all ideas come to humans by experience, not time. Expanding on this notion, Locke asserts that personal reflection derives from the pleasure and pain that one is exposed to (*Essay*, II.vii.2). Moral intuitions are a direct reflection of the society that an individual immerses themselves in, for moral intuitions help process social emotions and effective social cognition (Woodward & Allman, 2007). This reflection of society and the self is depicted in a study where researchers attempted to pinpoint how many infants between six and to 10 months developed a sense of good and bad. The study revealed that 80% of the infants preferred the “good” over the “bad,” indicating the early ability to distinguish the dualistic nature of ethics (Hamlin et al., 2007). As a result, society easily benefits from moral intuition, as it is a developing factor in what has previously been enacted. Hence, intuition itself is a widely accepted concept between scholars and researchers. The effects of intuition can also be exemplified by an instance in which a team of researchers from the University of New South Wales developed a novel technique regarding how unconscious intuition can improve one’s decision-making as well as speed up certain decisions (Lufityanto et al., 2016). In the study, the selected group of people who unconsciously made decisions performed better in selecting the “right” choice compared to the other group that was informed of what was happening around them. According to the study, Joel Pearson states that “we can use unconscious information in our body or brain to help guide us through life, to enable better decisions, faster decisions, and be more confident in the decisions we make.” Furthermore, moral intuitions are depicted as accurate, for they give a clear, unfiltered view of what one expects from society. Additionally, moral intuitions promote strong automatic responses to moral facts. Empirical evidence suggests that it harnesses individuals the potential to make the right decision in a specific situation. This is mainly because it gathers its intelligence from prior instances and beliefs.

Moral intuition not only accounts for the philosophical debate surrounding it but also the social relationships and bonds that it forms. In a study conducted to determine how many Americans trusted strangers through reliance on moral intuition, over half of Americans revealed trusting strangers, linking it to the universality of cultures and the moral intuition that stemmed from it (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Notwithstanding, these results are placed in contrast with Japan, which historically valued in-group morality rather than the universal acceptance of novel groups of people. Only 36% of the Japanese in the study trusted strangers, which reflects the differences in ethical values that each individual has developed. In consequence, one must consider the full, resulting actions that derive from uniquely-formed moral intuitions. Individuals attain better results implementing actions obtained from viewpoints accordingly in lieu of allowing a lack of experience, which contributes to the fragility of said morality.

UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

Despite the abundance of support for relying on moral intuition, there are numerous cases of backlash on whether intuitionism is beneficial. One of the few concerns is that intuition can be subjective. When people make different judgments based on their moral intuitions, it is criticized that it may be difficult to decide which one is more correct. Thus, there is a lack of objective criteria to resolve the conflict when different intuitions are in disagreement (On, 2022). To clarify, David Hillson, a renowned risk management reporter, indicated that intuitionism is highly specific to the individual and may cause conflicts (2007). Furthermore, it is argued that intuitionism lacks a clear theoretical basis for expanding upon moral intuition beyond the reach of the individuals who attain it. Research does not provide a sufficient explanation of why a specific intuition is considered a moral truth and how such intuition can be trusted. For example, a psychological or neuroscientific explanation is needed for the question of whether pain is bad, but intuitionism does not stop at simply answering with the fact that it is a universally recognized sentiment. Instead, it incorporates differing ideas from a variety of sources, which renders it infeasible to come to a consensus about the true, ethical solution to a particular situation. Since moral intuition is not universally agreed upon, it is also often highlighted that moral intuition is absolute and does not change. However, this is untrue in modern-day practices. Moral intuition has changed over the course of history and society. An example of a striking contrast between the past and the present is that slavery was morally acceptable in the past but is now considered immoral. This is due to the fact that moral intuition is not a fixed truth but is shaped by social and cultural features instead. Thus, with the increasing usage of new values, the universality of morality is gained and lessens the negativity regarding moral intuition.

Moral reasoning

CONTRAST TO MORAL INTUITION

Moral reasoning significantly differs from that of moral intuition. Robert Zajonc's theory of emotion encapsulates this difference by describing the human head as having two operating systems. The first operating system is the automatic, swift emotional system, while the second system is a slow, cognitive system (Berridge, 2010). Humans have an immediate and emotional reaction to a specific object, which is why first impressions are paramount. It is only afterward that humans approach and judge the object rationally. For instance, if ten people were hiding in the basement of a building in a city under siege by enemy forces, with the newborn child of one of the men beginning to cry very loudly, the man is left with an easy choice to make as the benefit is greater than the cost. Killing the newborn child would save nine people, in contrast to the decision of letting the child cry and risking being found by enemy forces. However, these thoughts make us worry about the choice of killing a newborn child. Eventually, the people in the basement will attempt to solve problems through communication. In other words, killing a newborn through cost-benefit analysis is moral intuition, and the subsequent thinking is moral reasoning. Immediate responses that cause moral intuition encompass relationships, experiences, and sounds. Moral intuition facilitates quick decision-making and strengthens one's trust in individual values. On the other hand, moral intuition may lead to biased judgments such as favoritism and prejudice because of preconceptions and more time to convince oneself. A focal example of this is implicit bias, which refers to ideologies that form due to subconscious prejudices from individuals towards unfamiliar groups of people. Correspondingly, implicit biases are difficult to address because they are deeply ingrained in the human mind. However, these counterproductive beliefs will not serve as a barrier to forming relationships among people if individuals continuously reevaluate necessary ethical values.

The development of moral intuition is also connected to the question of moral direction in one's life. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of life, which is survival and reproduction in all ecological laws, humans are destined to maintain physical homeostasis. They constantly devise ways to use their physical budget efficiently. In this process, rewards are periodically attained through human motivation (Prudkov, 2014). Motivation leads humans to feel an intuition of how they should act in their relationships with others to obtain this reward throughout their lives. Since humans have already learned through a lengthy developmental or evolutionary process, they realize that behaving in a certain way will develop stronger relationships, hence, the most efficient strategy for the ultimate goal of life. The intuitive impulse refers to moral intuition. Another popular scenario is a train coming from one end of the railroad. The other end of the road is divided into two, with five workers on one branch and one worker on the other. If the train does not

slow down and continues to run, it will kill the five workers. In this situation, a majority of individuals who are asked this question will save the lives of five people in exchange for one. However, if this scenario is slightly modified and the same group of people are asked whether they would save the five people by pushing a person off the overpass and stopping the train instead of changing the track, almost everyone would say no (Armstrong, 2024). Despite the result being the same as the previous situation, the difference occurs due to the unpleasantness, disgust, and rejection that comes from the situation where one directly harms someone to prevent another disaster (Haidt et al., 2000). There is no correct answer for each scenario, but there is an answer that most people prefer. If moral intuition is formed to effectively manage the physical budget by meeting the expectations of others, people will follow the moral choice preferred by the majority, even in situations where they cannot know what choices others make subconsciously (Frith & Frith, 2006). Predicting others' expectations depends on how much we recognize the difference between our observations and the actual observed results. For instance, when someone tells a joke in front of people, they expect the audience to find it funny. However, if their response is cold, the person telling the joke will experience a discrepancy between expectations and results. Some people take this discrepancy seriously, while others do not. The former are more likely to develop the ability to predict others' preferences more accurately through mistakes, which leads to a display of moral reasoning.

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

In typical situations, moral intuitions come first and lead to moral reasoning and moral judgments. Since moral reasoning is derived from conscious evaluation requiring reflective logic with a more nuanced evaluation of the situation at hand, it is nearly impossible for moral reasoning to be conceived without evaluating it based on moral intuition. A situation where moral intuitions come into play is when one reacts instantly to comfort a crying child, while a situation where moral responses are utilized is deciding against investing in a company due to its malicious human rights record. Hence, it is difficult to identify moral reasoning in the absence of moral intuitions. Due to the claims that moral intuitions lack direct perceptions and are unreliable sources, some believe that moral reasoning is superior to moral intuitions (Sinnott-Armstrong et al., 2010). Moralization, a distinctive mindset that can be turned on and off like a switch, leads to the recruitment of emotions, such as anger or sadness, because of its critical nature. For instance, consuming meat is not universally regarded as a moral issue, but it can become moralized in time because societies impose the idea repeatedly on individuals (Croney & Swanson, 2023). Moral reasoning leads to moralization, for it governs the state of the mind, leaving time for individuals to draw a line between just and unjust that can be crossed or altered at any time. Moralization may serve to be a double-edged sword, for on the one hand, it can strive to allow justification for the actions taken, but on the other hand, it may disparage the purity of ethical choices that individuals make on

the spot. Experimentally manipulating disgust or support affects consequent moral reasoning and, therefore, is detrimental to individuals and society as a whole (Kraaijeveld & Jamrozik, 2022). Moral intuitions and reasoning play a factor in the famous debate of whether humans are inherently good (G, 2018). A strong believer in innate human goodness was a Confucian scholar, Mencius. If an individual's heart was naturally good, then moral intuitions could easily be trusted. Still, even if this theory were to be considered false, then societies and individuals must uncover the moral truths in life through experiences, and if so, human beings can grasp these truths intuitively. Thus, even in the sense that one doesn't believe moral intuitions to be reliable because of the emotions it is sourced from, the emotions that humans possess will merely work to strengthen the debate that emotions help moral intuitions to be dependable.

Moral foundation theory

While delving into moral intuition, the principles of morality are a key thought to outline. Differences in morality are derived from differences in society. According to evolutionary psychology, there is a moral law formed in the context of human evolution, meaning that morality is considered crucial regardless of time and place. When another is injured, humans empathize and sympathize emotionally like a reflex. There are moral laws that people have developed since antiquity, as each culture has different standards for judging loyalty and betrayal, authority and destruction, and integrity and corruption. The moral foundation theory, however, argues that there are five basic moral principles that every culture is comprised of regardless of its background:

1. Harm/care
2. Fairness/reciprocity
3. Ingroup/loyalty
4. Authority/respect
5. Purity/sanctity

Each foundation is linked to other values and has its own background and limitations. Harm/Care evolved from sensitivity to suffering in offspring (Prince, 2010), fairness/reciprocity stems from cooperation, loyalty is based on trust, and authority is an example of virtue being displayed in the form of social structure. Lastly, purity is formed from an emotion of disgust, which signifies the system of values that are formed based on others. The five basic moral principles are the very core of what makes up ethical behavior in human lives and are in any way the driving force behind all moral intuitions, regardless of what prior experiences one may have. Due to the differences in perspectives, one may develop a completely dissimilar point of view on a topic, as shown by the graph below.

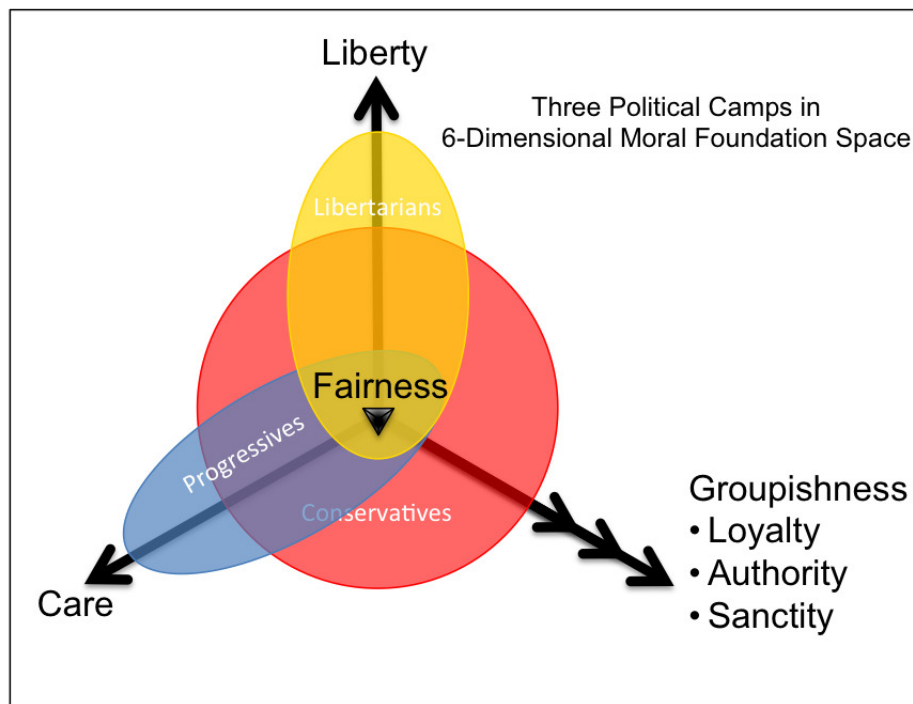


Figure 1. Divergence of Moral Foundation Branches (*Moral: Be the Change*, 2016).

The difference in values of different political parties, as well as linked values, demonstrate a clear distinction in the outcome of moral intuition in human beings. Consequently, there are universal moral norms that are established over periods of time. The existence of universal morality is through one's moral intuition because universal morality cannot be reached through moral reasoning. We cannot infer justification from merely the facts. Inferring what should be right from facts is committing the naturalistic fallacy (The Ethics Centre, 2016). One cannot say, "It's always been X. So you should do X," even though X isn't a morally just thing to do. Furthermore, goodness is not defined as a natural property. Even if we define good as pleasure, we still ask whether pleasure is good. Just as we cannot define the word "red," we cannot define the term "good." Goodness and universal moral norms are not objects of reasoning but are intuitively self-evident (Fisher, 1954). From the moral foundation theory, one is able to discover how morality is encapsulated in a structure of core values and beliefs that individuals hold. Accordingly, moral intuitions are already pivotal in the age of globalization and cultural diffusion, which renders it difficult to entirely affront the concept of moral intuitions itself.

Discussion

Moral intuitions are developed through past information collected from the human brain. As a result, the personal emotional connection with the individual can, in a way, strengthen the argument that intuition is unbiased and reliable. It is also crucial to note that decisions produced from moral intuitions are not completely unjustifiable. One's background, as well as prior experiences, serve as natural causes of how one will act throughout

their lifetime. At times, moral intuitions may be mistaken because moral agents can misunderstand a situation, especially since moral judgment may have been wiser to trust in certain situations due to self-delusion. These mistakes cannot be escaped, for every individual makes lapses in their actions at times. However, when these mistakes regarding intuitions occur, they can be detected through reflection and are attempted to be fixed. Moral intuitions may be viewed as the “first draft” of human decisions. Experience is what revises the first draft during childhood but to a lesser extent during adulthood. There is also the consideration of moralization, in which an individual is led to believe one specific point of view because the individuals around them are enforcing the idea upon them, prohibiting other ideas from taking root. This emphasis on having a fixed point of perception addresses the importance of each individual having differing perspectives on the same situation. Thus, adaptive decision-making is needed in a society where individuals are constantly apprehending new information and digesting it to form unique values and beliefs. In lieu of moral reasoning, which allows room for individuals to craft new opinions based on biased situations, adaptive decision-making enhances the thinking of individuals gradually to stay focused on genuine but also intuitive decisions. When individuals are confronted with previously discussed misconceptions, they often re-evaluate their decisions (Cookson et al., 2021). By reinforcing ideas that do play a beneficial role in replacing the ones that do not play a positive role over time, adaptive decision-making aids the reliability of moral intuitions. In order to foster a society wherein individuals feel the need to continuously refine their previous beliefs depending on novel situations, individuals must hone sensitivity to new influxes of ideas and changes that happen around them (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). Hence, adaptive decision-making further refines an individual’s moral intuition by allowing them to reconsider previous beliefs from new experiences, reduce cognitive biases, and incorporate divergent thinking by navigating complex moral dilemmas.

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