

Ethical Intuitions

Ethical Intuitionism: Michael Huemer defends the view called “Ethical Intuitionism.” This is basically the view that we can perceive moral truths via a faculty called “ethical intuition.” An ethical intuition is a way that things seem to be, morally. For instance, if we see a child being stabbed, we have an intense internal reaction that what we are seeing is wrong. This is a moral “intuition.” The action seems to be wrong.

Huemer’s view is that, roughly: We should assume that things are the way that they seem to be.

Objections: Here are some objections to Ethical Intuitionism:

(1) “Intuitions” are not some special insight into moral truths. They are really just the products of whatever we already believe about morality.

Reply: First, there have to be SOME things that seem to us to be true that do not stem from previous beliefs. It can’t be previous beliefs all the way back. At some point there has to be a beginning; i.e., a place where things just “seem” true without the influence of any prior beliefs at all.

Second, if this objection were true, then we could never have intuitions that disagree with what we already believe about morality. However, though we believe it is wrong to kill (e.g., in Fat Man or Organ Harvest), we have the intuition that pulling the lever in Trolley is permissible. And philosophers have struggled a great deal to explain this intuition, as it does not seem to stem from a prior belief at all. Furthermore, it is worth noting that utilitarians do not have the intuition that killing the healthy patient in Organ Harvest is ok. They BELIEVE it is morally permissible, but they admit that this is “counter-intuitive”—even to them.

(2) Intuitions are queer, because they are not like any of the other ways that we come to know things. As such, it makes more sense to deny their existence.

Reply: Huemer lists several ways that we come to know things; by sensory perception, intuition, introspection, conceptual analysis, and reasoning. This objection might as well say “perception is queer, because it is not like any of these other ways of coming to know things.” It seems more likely that it is not the intuitions themselves that the objector thinks is queer, but morality in general. Indeed, this objection is often raised by ethical nihilists. If there are moral truths though, it seems plausible to think that we could know them in the same way that we know that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time, or that if A is bigger than B, and B is bigger than C, that A is bigger than C.

(3) If intuitions are whatever we use to perceive moral truths, then every ethical intuition we have would be of something true. In other words, ethical intuitions could never give us false information. They would be infallible.

Reply: Intuitions are not infallible. Huemer admits that some intuitions are much more credible than others. Here are five ways that this might happen:

- (1) Some intuitions are simply stronger, or seem more clearly true, than others. A stronger intuition has a greater chance of being reliable than a weak one.
- (2) Some intuitions are more widely shared. An intuition that is more widely shared has a greater chance of being reliable than an unshared one.
- (3) Some intuitions are more complex than others. The simpler an intuition is, the greater chance it has of being reliable.
- (4) Some intuitions are more open to bias than others (e.g., intuitions influenced by political commitments, religious commitments, cultural or parental bias, etc.). Intuitions easily influenced by biases have a lesser chance of being reliable than unbiased ones.
- (5) Some intuitions cohere more with our other intuitions. Intuitions that do not conflict with others are more likely to be reliable than intuitions that contradict or conflict with other intuitions that we are having.

Since intuitions can be unreliable, they are obviously not infallible. If we “intuit” that something is true, that doesn’t guarantee that it IS true. Intuitions only give us some “prima facie” reason to believe them. That reason can be overridden, if we discover evidence to the contrary.

Huemer explains how an intuition could be overridden by comparing it with another form of perception: sight. Consider:

- Imagine that you saw a cup on the table in front of you, but when you went to grab it, your hand passed right through it. Furthermore, when you ask your friends if they see a cup there, they all say no. In this case, though it “seemed” to you that there was a cup on the table, you would eventually conclude that there is not a cup. Factors (2) and (5) provided overwhelming evidence to the contrary—namely, your sense of touch contradicted your sense of sight, and your intuition was not shared by others.

An FMRI Experiment: Joshua Greene asks,

“How is it that nearly everyone manages to conclude that it is acceptable to sacrifice one life for five in the trolley dilemma [Trolley] but not in the footbridge dilemma [Fat Man], in spite of the fact that a satisfying justification for distinguishing between these two cases is remarkably difficult to find?”

In order to get to the bottom of things, Greene conducted several experiments where patients were hooked up to an FMRI (brain scan), and shown various dilemmas such as Trolley and Fat Man. Patients were actually shown three sorts of dilemmas:

- Personal-Moral: These are moral dilemmas that are more “hands on” or personal, such as Fat Man.
- Impersonal-Moral: These are moral dilemmas that are more “hands off” or impersonal, such as Trolley.
- Non-Moral: These are dilemmas that do not involve morality. These are morally neutral choices; e.g., should I wear the blue shirt or the green one?

Greene found that, in the personal-moral dilemmas, the emotional centers of the brain were much more active—whereas in the other two sorts of dilemmas, the rational centers of the brain were more active.

In the personal-moral cases, the patient’s emotions actually acted as a sort of “interference.” This interference is of the same sort that causes patients in other experiments, when asked to read the word written down on a flash card—and the word is “red” but written in green ink—to say “green” instead of “red.”



Utilitarians have pointed this experiment and made the claim that our intuitions in Fat Man must be mistaken, because they are subject to this emotional interference. On the other hand, since our intuitions in Trolley are purely rational, they must be more reliable. Utilitarians claim, in fact, that the intuitions that there is a distinction between intending and foreseeing harm, or doing and allowing harm, are ALL mistaken, and merely products of our emotions, which interfere with our moral deliberations and cause us to act irrationally.

Some Questions: Is there a reason to favor the rational-moral intuitions over the emotional-moral ones? Why? If the emotional intuitions are discredited, does this imply that the rational intuitions are reliable (or vice versa)? Why?