

Do We Have Any Good Reasons to Trust Our Moral Intuition?

Elin Yuan

Li Po Chun United Worlds College, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Moral intuition is the instinctive, immediate understanding which self-evident basic moral propositions are based upon, arising from an inner sense of right and wrong that operates without the need for conscious reasoning—in other words, intuition(Stratton-Lake *Intuitionism in ethics*). These judgments often occur spontaneously and with a sense of certainty, and help us navigate social interactions by providing quick assessments of ethical issues. However, there is no convincing reason to trust moral intuitionism by itself because the way that morality develops from innate sources and manifests itself as a result of socialization is inconsistent and thus unreliable. This paper will prove this by assessing the origin of moral intuition and how that affects the reliability of moral intuition in daily life.

Where Does Moral Intuition Originate?

Arguments about the origin of moral intuition can be divided into three categories: social sources, innate sources, and a combination of social and innate sources.

Monistic Theories of Moral Intuition

Arguments that moral intuition comes from social sources suggest that moral intuition is a direct product of our social surroundings, reflecting a variety of factors such as social norms and education.

This argument is exemplified by the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who argues that moral beliefs are not inherent or purely rational but are products of socialization and collective life. According to Durkheim, individuals internalize the moral values of their society through social institutions such as family, education, and religion(Durkheim *Moral education: A study in the theory and application of the Sociology of Education*). One example would be the development of moral intuition surrounding the concept of justice. In traditional societies, justice often means retributive justice, where punishment matches the crime to maintain order. In modern societies, justice shifts towards distributive justice, focusing on a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. This shift reflects the evolving structure and needs of society, showing how moral intuitions about justice change with social organization.

However, Durkheim's argument is flawed. He ignores the existence of the innate sources that are biological factors, and how many moral actions are rooted in biological and evolutionary traits that have become innate in the human psyche. Moral behaviours and emotions like empathy, justice, and the aversion to harming others are shaped by evolutionary processes that favour social cooperation. Neurological evidence, including functional MRI studies, points to specific brain regions (such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala) as central to moral judgment(Marazziti et al. *The neurobiology of moral sense: Facts or hypotheses?*). In a study conducted on the topic, the findings indicate that specific brain regions—such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), the amygdala, and the orbitofrontal cortex—play crucial roles in shaping morality. The Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (VMPFC), for example, has been observed to integrate emotional and cognitive inputs to evaluate moral situations: damage to this area can result in impaired moral judgment and decision-making. This body of evidence suggests that moral

sense is underpinned by a network of brain regions that integrate emotional and cognitive information, influencing moral judgments and behaviours.

The Suitability of Dual-Source Theories

Despite arguments for both the purely social and purely innate origin of moral intuition, neither is convincing by itself. Moral intuition develops from both sources.

If one were to make an argument for the purely biological origin of moral intuition, it would be equally difficult to validate. It's unreasonable to completely separate moral judgments from natural facts about human nature and the world, as human beings are part of the natural world, and evolutionary processes have shaped our moral intuitions and behaviours. The biological argument overlooks multiple connections between innate moral beliefs and our social behaviours. The belief that facts and norms are entirely disconnected is flawed because facts inevitably influence the mental processes that lead to the adoption of norms.

Attachment theory explains how attachment behaviours, such as seeking proximity to a caregiver, are rooted in evolutionary biology to ensure survival. Secure attachment in early childhood fosters empathy, trust, and social cooperation, which are foundational to moral norms (Bowlby *Attachment and loss*). Conversely, neglect or inconsistency can lead to insecure attachment styles (avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized). This phenomenon can affect future attachment styles within people, permanently shaping their innate judgement. Despite the consistent biological impulse to seek parental attachment, the developed attachment styles prove that biological facts (innate attachment behaviours) and social experiences (caregiver interactions) are deeply interconnected, shaping moral intuitions. Larger norms are not developed in isolation from external socialization; instead, they are deeply intertwined.

Moral intuition is difficult to define concisely when considering its intricate role in our daily lives. Morality involves complex cognitive processes, including reasoning, empathy, and abstract thinking. While neural and evolutionary biology can explain basic instincts, they do not fully account for higher-order moral reasoning and the development of sophisticated ethical systems. On the other hand, moral development is heavily influenced by social interactions and learning. Instances such as cultural variability, where different cultures exhibit diverse moral values, or historical changes of moral intuitions and norms through time, indicate that moral intuitions are influenced by cultural context and social learning rather than being purely innate. From childhood, individuals learn moral values and norms through family, education, and peer interactions, which a purely biological perspective cannot fully explain. The complex interplay of moral intuition involves the interaction between innate biological factors and the social influences that shape and refine our moral judgments.

Thus, an integrated approach that considers both natural and social factors provides a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of moral intuition. This approach accommodates the complexities of human morality, acknowledging both its universality and variability.

Is It Trustworthy?

It is the position of this paper that there is no good reason to trust moral intuitionism, as there is no guarantee that it will lead us to morally good decisions.

Variability of intuition is inevitable, as it's highly variable on a person-to-person basis. Intuitions play a crucial role in ethical decisions by providing the instinctual basis that guides the actions and thoughts that follow them. Despite further rational thought refining the initial impression of intuition, the core of the thought process remains grounded in intuition, leaving its mark on the ideology behind one's moral judgment. The non-rational nature of intuition leads to action based mainly on the result of socialization rather than the also present consistent innate source. Even if saving human life is innately seen as morally correct—whether that is due to our predisposed nature to value life, or biological and evolutionary reasons—that does not mean that actions and beliefs following

this value are definitively correct. If two people believe that a certain ethnic group of humans has a population-level statistical hereditary predisposition, one person could conclude that the persecution of this ethnic group is an excusable "necessary evil" for the sake of future human life, while another might conclude that it is an unjustifiable evil to persecute living humans. Both of these perspectives value human lives from fundamentally different stances, showing the difference in manifestation.

The variability of the manifestations of ethical intuition is significantly influenced by social factors such as upbringing, culture, and personal experiences. For example, collectivist cultures emphasize group harmony, while individualist cultures prioritize autonomy (SANTIAGO *Individualism and collectivism: Cultural orientation in locus of control and moral attribution under conditions of Social Change*). These cultural norms shape moral intuitions, showing that they are not solely innate but are deeply influenced by the social environment. Collectivist cultures might view filial piety as a core moral duty, while individualist cultures might prioritize personal achievements and rights, with moral intuition developed from this cultural norm varying based on priority. Humans are naturally social creatures who learn by observing and imitating others. Moral intuitions can be influenced by the behaviour of peers, authority figures, and cultural role models, leading to the internalization of socially accepted moral standards. Continuous socialization profoundly shapes moral intuitions, more so than innate tendencies do.

In many cases of socialization in intuitive morality, biases or prejudices can be reflected in actions that result from an intuitive moral belief, leading to moral intuition being thoroughly unreliable due to the prejudice that exists in one's viewpoint. Societal norms and values provide frameworks for interpreting and expressing innate moral responses. These frameworks can emphasize or suppress certain moral intuitions, making social influences more dominant in shaping overall moral outlooks. Because moral intuition is present in all judgments that are made—with the initial impression it provides remaining even after further rational thought—when these decisions are made in high-impact environments, they can strongly affect both the decision-maker and others within the same society. An example of this is racial prejudice in intuition.

When one is socialized in a group that inherently accepts the narrative that a particular race is inferior, moral intuitions can be shaped by unconscious biases learned from a racially biased society (Alcoff *Critical philosophy of race*). It often goes unquestioned that certain species of animals are deemed inferior to the human race, and a similar effect is created in racist narratives, which often depict white supremacy as an unquestioned standard. These prejudiced supposed certainties influence judgments and behaviours without conscious awareness. Especially in a society such as our own, where a degree of racism is ingrained within social, legal, and legislative systems, historical and structural racism can shape perceptions and intuitions about justice and fairness. Racially segregated housing, enforced through systematic disparities, exemplifies systemic discrimination (Banaji et al. *Systemic racism: Individuals and interactions, institutions and Society*). Economic, political, and social inequalities lead many Black individuals to live in impoverished areas, creating racial isolation. This segregation not only increases disproportionate costs in terms of network opportunities and education for these communities but also normalizes the disparity as there are no clear recent discriminatory actions, creating a positive feedback loop that perpetuates systematic bias against Black individuals. People may intuitively accept norms and behaviours that perpetuate racial inequalities without recognizing their inherent bias. A manifestation of this sort of moral intuition is the gut feeling you get when someone feels untrustworthy to you, but more often than not that gut feeling is visually determined (Equality and Human Rights Commission et al. *Processes of prejudice: Theory, evidence and Intervention*). Through systematic and cultural racism, people often draw up the image of a "dangerous person" as dark-skinned, leading to more people distrusting darker-skinned individuals on instinct. Bias affects so many of the principle-based arguments that are in conflict, with discriminatory biases, often stemming from social factors such as religion and culture, being alarmingly prevalent in discussions regarding basic human rights. To allow for a force that is certainly biased, context-dependent, and irrational to be seen as a trustworthy force of action is illogical and irresponsible, considering both its omnipresent nature and its inconsistent manifestation.

One could argue as a refutation that despite variations in moral intuitions across cultures, these differences are often minor compared to the broad areas of agreement. Furthermore, there is likely a shared ethical intuition aimed

at understanding others, which facilitates overcoming regional differences and fosters mutual comprehension. However, while in certain situations a mutual agreement can be found within differing moral intuitions, there is no basis upon which one can ensure the compatibility of moral intuitions overall, even agreement of morality is difficult to guarantee. Socialization is not entirely a matter of consent, and how people are affected by their surroundings is equally dependent on the individual, leading to large enough variations in moral intuitions that it is difficult to guarantee a common manifestation.

Conclusion

There is significant evidence supporting the role of social factors in shaping our moral beliefs, but there is also considerable evidence pointing to biological and evolutionary influences. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that both social and natural elements contribute to the development of moral intuition. Because moral intuition originates from both innate and social sources and thus isn't trustworthy—largely because of the variability of social surroundings—there is no good reason to trust moral institutions as possessing legitimate decision-making power.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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