

How To Train an Elephant

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores moral intuition, its influence on moral decision-making, and how moral intuition could be more reliable through both mindfulness and character development. Following on the ideas of Jonathan Haidt, the paper admits how moral intuition is heavily influenced by emotions and dictates moral judgments. However, individuals are not bound to blindly follow their intuitions. Thích Nhất Hạnh's idea on controlling emotions through mindfulness inspired people to change through practice. Moreover, Aristotle's philosophy of character development also reminds us of the role of habitual actions in cultivating virtues, which, in other words, shape one's moral intuition over time. In conclusion, human beings can constantly change moral intuitions to be more beneficial, more aligned with rationality and virtuous principles so that they can positively guide our ways in daily moral decisions.

Introduction

Moral intuition often refers to “assessments, judgments, or responses [to different situations], where these responses typically occur quickly or automatically and carry with them a strong feeling of authority or appropriateness but where one need not be (and often is not) aware of any conscious reasoning process that leads to this assessment” (Woodward & Allma, 2007). It contains both a judgment of the moral value of a given state of affairs and what should be done in or in response. But moral intuitions are not uniform across the human race. There are times when our moral intuitions help individuals and society, but there are also times when they cause harm. To ask whether we have good reasons to trust our moral intuition implies that we have a choice in the matter. According to Jonathan Haidt, people do not so much have a choice as they have a biological habit of generally trusting their moral intuition. This essay will follow Haidt's idea that moral intuition is strongly affected by emotions and largely determines our moral judgments and decisions. Despite this setup, however, I will argue that people are never doomed to always follow their moral intuitions. With practice, people can learn to make rational and virtuous moral judgments and decisions, thereby making moral intuition more trustworthy.

Moral Intuitions, Good and Bad

In his book *The Gift of Fear*, Gavin De Becker (1999) described one example of how helpful but also corrupt moral intuition can be. A woman who had just been raped was told to stay in the room by her assailant; he said he would leave peacefully if she did not call the police. After the man left, she immediately escaped, later knowing that this decision prevented her murder. When DeBecker asked her why she would choose to do that, she said she didn't know, and later gave a possible explanation. This is because, at that time, the judgment and action she made was an immediate response according to her moral intuition. She automatically considered it as a proper way of dealing with this situation and this efficient system indeed helped her make an effective choice in saving her own life. The need for survival helped the woman make the right decision in the moment. By contrast, the criminal's moral intuitions were corrupt. We cannot assume the criminal considered the bad crimes he committed as right. But his decision implies that he considers his action as justified or acceptable based on his distorted moral intuition. His willingness to threaten and

deceive humans without any remorse or empathy contrasts sharply with the strong intuitive response to survive, showing us how different moral intuition can be.

Man is by nature social. It is in our social interactions that we get our moral intuitions—from larger social values and rules. But not everyone experiences society the same way. The rape victim and her assailant have different moral intuitions, even though they perhaps grew up in the same society, albeit with distinct values, cognition, and cultural influences that ultimately shaped their divergent moral intuitions. Add to this difference the impact that emotions play in the moment of decision. Even if the rapist had a corrupt intuition in his mind, if he were rational, his intuition could remind him of the harm that would result from his actions. However, if he is more emotional, he might neglect this message from his rational brain. The same can be said for the victim. If she were more rational, she might have just listened to what she was told. But the emotion of fear forced her to listen to her intuitive response, which saved her life. Emotions, when present, act as dominators of our minds and enable us to do either good or bad depending on our underlying moral intuitions and the specifics of the situation.

The Power of Emotions

People's moral intuitions are largely influenced by their emotions, but is there any substantial evidence that can support this argument? In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Haidt (2006) used Antonio Damasio's experiment to support this idea. When certain parts of the orbitofrontal cortex are damaged, people lose their emotions, showing no bodily responses when observing scenes of horror or beauty. Surprisingly, in the absence of emotion, they cannot make any judgment at all, even the simplest actions in their daily life. His work shows that without our moral intuition, as a manifestation of our emotions, human beings would not make any moral judgments and decisions, let alone speedy and good judgments. Moral reasoning, as a deliberate process of using rationality and logic, cannot make any effect without the help of our moral intuition.

Not only are emotions a significant foundational element in decision-making, but they also usually determine the outcome. Moral judgments suggested by moral intuition are immediate products in our emotional minds. By contrast, moral reasonings, which involve the effort of deliberation, is a slower process. Haidt suggests that reason is not just slower, but that its ideas are based on those of the emotions. He compares human rationality to a rider on an elephant, where the elephant is the emotional brain. The elephant goes where it wants to go, without the control of the rider. But the rider can make up a story about why the elephant went where it went, which seems a plausible explanation according to human rationality, even if it isn't actually the reason the elephant (the emotional brain) did what it did. In the end, rationality doesn't influence the decision; it merely creates a story to explain the decision—even if the story isn't necessarily true. To illustrate this view, Haidt gave an example that most people would immediately judge sibling incest as an immoral act. When questioned, they gave various explanations. However, after Haidt introduced conditions such as birth control to eliminate the possibility of babies with genetic abnormalities and a better relationship between the siblings, participants then struggled to justify their initial judgment. Incest just naturally feels wrong to most human beings, even without sound moral reasoning. The elephant has decided this, and all the rider can do is try to explain why. Moral reasoning fabricates things that are based on emotion. Thus, Haidt's elephant rider is more of a tour guide, explaining the route the elephant takes, rather than someone able to determine the route.

Thích Nhất Hạnh and Mindfulness

Facing the variance of moral intuition which is heavily affected by emotions and the essence of fabricating for moral reasoning only after judgments are made, what can we do to ensure that we can make correct moral judgments facing different situations? Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Buddhist monk, teaches that with mindfulness individuals can have healthier and happier lifestyles, be more careful and rational, and better control their intuition—or, in Haidt's image, become *influential* elephant riders. Like Haidt, Thích Nhất Hạnh admitted the power of emotions. He described humans'

emotions as living in the basement of a house, the “store consciousness”, or subconsciousness of our mind. Emotions constantly emerge from the basement and manifest in the living room of the house, the conscious reasoning part of our mind. We may lock them in the basement, but sooner or later they will break out, and there will be a disaster in our living room. Instead of trying to block them, we can recognize, embrace, and take care of these emotions with the energy of mindfulness. With its help, we become aware of our whole body and mind, healing ourselves and sending emotions back down again. In our decision-making, whenever we are stuck and trapped by our emotions, we should use the energy of mindfulness to create a more peaceful *and rational* state.

Thích Nhất Hạnh and thousands of practitioners of mindfulness proved that mindfulness does help us make better moral judgments. We can limit the influence of emotions on our moral decisions. This is often taught as something that happens in the present moment, but I believe the key to mindfulness is its *long-term effects* of training the mind throughout the course of many “present moments.” It is a constant practice of mindfulness that helps people adjust their emotions. In essence, people are forming a habit of response, gradually changing their automatic system of emotional responses. In this way, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teaching actually concerns controlling emotions by cultivating a new habit in our automatic system. Rationality still does not override moral intuition in the moment, but it does influence moral intuition over the long haul such that moral intuition is less affected by emotions. Here, Haidt’s elephant rider is less of a tour guide than a trainer for the elephant.

Aristotle and Character Development

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle knew over two thousand years ago that the elephant of our emotions needed to be and could be trained by a program of character development, where—over a long period of training—reason plays a role in changing the underlying character of a person’s moral intuitions. For Aristotle, it isn’t that people can override moral intuition *today*; rather, it is more about how people devote themselves to a long-term program of training their emotions so as to make better judgments and choices *over the course of their lives*. The program cultivates moral virtues, the good qualities of character that are morally commendable in society. Good character is not innate but is perfected through habit formation. We learn by doing.

Aristotle wrote: “Men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyres; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” We learn how to make moral choices by making moral choices, the effect of which is the cultivation of virtue. In practice, this means we apply our rationality to making, remembering, and implementing the training plan. Bit by bit people can really incorporate these good moral virtues into the foundation of their moral intuitions. These transformed moral intuitions will then automatically make better judgments and decisions based on the moral virtues developed in the person’s character. Though the elephant is still determining the path *at the moment*, the rider (who is also the elephant trainer) has determined the kinds of directional choices the elephant will make.

This fundamental change in moral intuition may still be influenced by emotions when different situations come to us. Luckily, as mindful and virtuous elephant riders, people will have a greater chance of making good moral judgments and decisions. Practice does not necessarily make one perfect, but it may make one better.

This power of practice reminds me of a joke that asks, “How do you eat an elephant?” The answer is: “One bite at a time.” In this paper, I have essentially asked, “How do you *train* an elephant?” The answer is basically the same: one day at a time, over a very long period. That’s how you train an elephant, and that’s how you can make your moral intuitions more trustworthy.

Acknowledgments

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

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