

When formulating ethical theories, the quandary that arises nearly always seems to be the question of whether the theory coincides with our moral intuitiveness, and if not, how we can somehow adjust the theory to do so. I call this a quandary because, as Donagan explains, nearly all our moral intuitions are based, either in part or whole, on a series of propositions founded in social and religious dogma, constructed through the years in Western thought. This would seem to indicate that moral intuitiveness is nothing more than the belief in formulations, used to evaluate ethical dilemmas, based completely on external factors, i.e. previous rules used by those who came before us. Thus, is moral intuition simply a ruse, a label placed on rhetoric that we can legitimately overlook when evaluating ethical theories? Should we instead ignore our intuitions, calling them invalid in the face of this evidence? What criteria should we instead use if not intuition?

It might be a good idea to begin by trying to understand just what intuition is first, and if indeed we truly have moral intuitiveness. When someone mentions they have an intuitive notion of something, generally they're referring to a "gut feeling", perhaps an emotional response to a certain situation. There seems to be no real cognitive process in intuition, much like we don't actively choose to be in love or feel depressed. We might posit that intuition is based on a priori knowledge, things we know genetically or spiritually, without ever having learned them. According to Donagan, however, nearly all our intuitions are based on existing structures, and are in fact learned behaviors we no longer need to focus on. Much like a child learning to tie his shoelaces, we somehow move from actively engaging in moral thinking and instead internalize rules religion, society, our parents, and etc. pass on to us. After I have tied my shoes several hundred

times, I no longer need to think about how to do it, and can instead perform the task nearly automatically. So too, it seems, that morality is put in the same role. A child might steal something without knowing it is wrong, his mother punishes him, and in the future he will feel badly about stealing, interpreting the pain (perhaps a stiff spanking) as an intuitive notion of morals. If the above is true, and moral intuition is a set of behavioral patterns we develop during our youth, we can hardly justify judging ethical systems based on intuition.

Is that all moral intuition is, however? Fundamentally, it seems that children do seem to learn morality from external sources, but there are examples where this is not the case. Take for instance a child raised by thieves, and whose whole life revolves around theft for personal gain. Most probably, the child will grow to become a thief, having no idea that stealing is immoral. It is also likely the child could see their way of life as fundamentally flawed, and decide to instead pursue legitimate means of income. Is this moral intuition? One might argue that in the second case, the child sees the problems theft causes, perhaps hearing a victim complain that the pilfering of her paycheck leaves no money left for groceries, resulting in going hungry for a week. Obviously, in this case the young bandit has made a deduction that their actions cause suffering in others, hence the behavior is incorrect, and there is no intuition involved. But, we might counter this claim by asking how the child knows suffering in others is wrong. Perhaps it could be an empathetic connection, the realization that their own suffering is analogous to the suffering in others, but does that really translate to wrongness? There seems to be something else at work here, a feeling we had previously decided to call intuition. No

reason exists for the thief to make the association between suffering in others and wrongness of actions other than a gut reaction.

Using the above example, we might decide to refine our idea of moral intuition. Perhaps most of our intuitive notions of morality are indeed based on social constructs, but when we seek the essence of why they exist primarily, we see that there is in fact some origin that rests solely in ourselves. Further, couldn't we conjecture that long long ago, the first cavemen had these same gut reactions to certain situations that arose, with no prior precedent? The first murder, perhaps, caused caveman Ugluk to feel bad about the death of his friend. Somehow, he understood that murder was unjustified, and the act deserved punishment. Thus, the idea that murder was immoral came not of merely social convenience but of intuition. We were taught that murder was immoral, not because it was fabricated out of whole cloth, but because Ugluk intuitively knew it was wrong. We must have some sort of "first cause" when speaking of social constructions, and the first cause of treating murder as a crime was the intuitive notion that was wrong. The whole of moral intuitiveness then rests in the past, passed on through learned behaviors shaped by society, but is still purely a product of internal factors. It seems that we can indeed place some validity in intuition as a means of ethical judgment.

The conclusion reached is that moral intuition, while admittedly learned from others in part or whole, has a basis that seems to be a priori in origin. The question arises again if this is indeed a valid method of evaluating ethical theories. Perhaps another problem is at hand: treating morality as merely human in foundation rather than a

reflection of reality. $2+2=4$, and it seems possible that someone might know this without ever having seen a mathematics book. This type of knowledge describes fundamental properties about the world that rest not on perception, but almost on the very essence of what makes the universe act how it does. Isn't it probable that morality is absolute, much like $2+2=4$ is absolute? In this case, moral intuition would have to be the basis for ethical theory, lest a theory be completely incomprehensible. Suppose a scientist creates a new theory of quantum mechanics that postulates many types of particles never conceived before. His theory is in reality a refinement of prior quantum theory, which is in turn derived from Newtonian mechanics, and so on. But there is a beginning somewhere, far in the past where Ugluk first wondered about what the stars were or the path of the sun during the day. Further, the notion that $2+2=4$ was understood by Ugluk, even if he was unable to enumerate precisely the set of symbols we use to represent the concept. Thus, the new quantum theory has, as its basis, an intuition about the world we know to be true, i.e. a priori knowledge. The groundwork of scientific thought is a simplistic fact that anyone can derive without any experiential data. Yet, we treat science as an explanation of absolute reality. How is this any different than what we're doing with ethics? We can treat ideas such as "murder is wrong" as absolutes due to their derivation, and thusly base morality on these absolutes. Modern ethical theory is based on prior theories, refined over time, but as their basis they utilize the explicit concepts gathered intuitively. It appears that the comparison between ethics and intuition is similar to the litmus test the scientist would use when evaluating his quantum theory. If his theory proposes that $2+2=3$, he might be inclined to throw it out the window immediately, much like we would do with an ethical theory that proposed murder was good. Either of these theories violates

principles that are so fundamental to how we understand the world to operate, that their validity seems impossible.

I have tried to show the soundness in using intuition as a basis for ethical theory, and I do not think disregarding intuition is plausible, much less possible, in the formulation of a theory that adequately explains morality and is functional. The usefulness of ethical theories is extremely important, lest they become merely exercises in rhetoric. Perhaps we can create an ethical theory that is true, but limited to explaining a very small set of circumstances; obviously, we would have trouble using this theory to do anything useful. Consequently, moral intuition should be the standard by which we judge all ethical theory, even if we do not always like the results. We might be inclined to question our intuitions, and we should from time to time, but basic precepts such as not to murder seem right at an inherent level. A theory that advocates blatant disregard for such proscribed rules is most likely flawed at the core, not giving proper heed to moral absolutism.