

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics

Feeling Good: Integrating the Psychology and Epistemology of Moral Intuition and Emotion

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Brad Hooker, Philip Stratton-Lake, Regina Rini, Antti Kauppinen, John Park and Brian Ballard, for their helpful comments.

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Publication Details

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics (ISSN: 2166-5087). December, 2018. Volume 5, Issue 3.

Citation

Dabbagh, Hossein. 2018. “Feeling Good: Integrating the Psychology and Epistemology of Moral Intuition and Emotion.” *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 5 (3): 1–30.

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Abstract

Is the epistemology of moral intuitions compatible with admitting a role for emotion? I argue in this paper that moral intuitions and emotions can be partners without creating an epistemic threat. I start off by offering some empirical findings to weaken Singer's (and Greene's and Haidt's) debunking argument against moral intuition, which treat emotions as a distorting factor. In the second part of the paper, I argue that the standard contrast between intuition and emotion is a mistake. Moral intuitions and emotions are not contestants if we construe moral intuition as non-doxastic intellectual seeming and emotion as a non-doxastic perceptual-like state. This will show that emotions support, rather than distort, the epistemic standing of moral intuitions.

Keywords

Moral Intuition, Emotion, Seemings, Non-Doxastic, Singer, Greene, Haidt

1. Introduction

Intuition sceptics believe that some of our intuitions do not have any epistemic value as they fail to provide moral knowledge (D. Sosa 2006, 633; E. Sosa 1998).¹ There are at least two different sorts of scepticism about intuition: conceptual and empirical.² The most prominent form of conceptual scepticism is raised by Benacerraf (1973), who doubts the possibility of having successful intuition and intuitive knowledge, since it is not clear what we can say about a *causal* relation between intuitions and what is intuited. The most prominent version of empirical scepticism comes from empirical studies that seem to suggest that intuitions are systematically and fundamentally biased. Although these two versions are different, they reach the same conclusion. Both claim that although we can think of conditions under which intuition has a positive epistemic status, those conditions are not, or *cannot* be, fulfilled.

1. For more details about the scepticism debate, see Williamson (2004).

2. We can also think of two sorts of scepticisms: global and selective. Sinnott-Armstrong (2006b), for example, is a global sceptic about the epistemology of moral intuition. Singer's (2005) scepticism, however, is a selective one with regard to moral intuition.

My purpose in this paper is to elaborate and critically examine the empirical variety of scepticism about intuition. Recent empirical studies in cognitive science and neuroscience have been thought to suggest worrying conclusions about philosophical and moral intuitions. For instance, they claim that intuitions about knowledge are culturally-dependent; that intuitions about intentional action have a biased source; and that moral intuitions are vulnerable to emotions, ordering and wording “frame effects” (Knobe and Nichols 2008, Ch. 1; Sinnott-Armstrong 2006a & 2008; Petrinovich and O’Neill 1996; Greene 2008). These experimental works, in fact, show that different kinds of intuitions philosophers use in ethics, epistemology, philosophy of action, philosophy of language, etc. are systematically biased and epistemologically unsound. Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg, for example, write,

We take the growing body of empirical data impugning various intuitions to present a real challenge for philosophers who wish to rely on intuitions as evidence (2008, 153).

I focus my discussion on issues raised in cognitive science about intuitions used in ethics. I argue that the empirical data does not necessarily create a threat to the epistemic status of moral intuition. In order to do that, I will show, first, there are other empirical findings that contradict the empirical findings cited by critics such as Singer, and actually support rather than undermine moral intuition’s epistemic status. Second, I will offer a new non-doxastic model for the epistemology and psychology of moral intuition that presents a theory of emotion suited to moral intuition. This will show that emotions do not *always* cloud moral intuitions’ epistemic status.

The plan for this paper is as follows. In the next section, I introduce a famous empirical evolutionary debunking argument against moral intuition raised by Singer. I argue that Singer’s argument is not justified. In the section after that, I discuss three empirical projects arguing that emotions *support*, rather than distort, the epistemic standing of moral intuitions. In this way, we can appreciate that the distinction between reason and emotion is less clear-cut than many have supposed. Then, I introduce and use the *non-doxastic seeming* account of intuition to build up an integrated psychological-epistemological model that accounts for the role of emotion. This model, I show, can rebut the empirical psychologists’ position against moral intuition and make room for intuition and emotion to be partners rather than contestants.

2. Singer's Evolutionary Debunking Argument for Radical Anti-Intuition Ethics

In the last decade, empirical social and moral psychologists have developed an interest in expressions of (dis)approval which are called "moral intuitions." They often say that moral intuitions are, in fact, nothing but "social intuitions," and social intuitions are, for example, first impressions or *immediate* responses (Appiah 2008, Ch. 3; Cushman, Young and Hauser 2006).

Peter Singer has long argued that we should be suspicious of our intuitive moral judgments. He defines moral intuitions as relatively *unreflective* moral judgments about *particular* cases (Singer 1981, Ch. 3).³ Singer reasons that much of the opposition to utilitarianism has come from counter-utilitarian moral intuitions. Singer has recently given a new argument to this effect, based heavily on empirical work in empirical moral and social psychology done by Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt (Singer 2005). Singer claims that this new work shows moral intuition to be methodologically and epistemologically unsound.

In this section, I will develop a counterargument to Singer's argument. I start by outlining the psychological research. The discussion of Greene and Haidt will be somewhat cursory, as my main target is Singer's substantive ethical argument.

2.1 Joshua Greene's Moral Tribes

Joshua Greene and his colleagues have written numerous empirical works on the psychology of moral judgments (Greene, Sommerville et al. 2001; Greene, Nystrom et al. 2004; Greene, Paxton, et al. 2011; Greene, Paxton, et al. 2013). Greene's most famous research program involves using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to study certain kinds of moral judgments. Subjects are placed in fMRI machines and asked to react to various moral and non-moral dilemmas. fMRI technology shows which parts of the brain are more active during this task and, presumably, which parts of the brain are more responsible for producing the relevant judgments.

In a series of works, Greene gives a philosophical account for such experiments (Greene 2008; 2013, Chs. 4-5; 2014; 2015). He distinguishes between "philosophical deontology," which emphasizes moral rules, and "philosophical consequentialism," which emphasizes producing the best overall consequences for all concerned. In Greene's favored terminology, deontology refers to judgments in favor of characteristically deontological

3. For an alternative view, see Austin (2003).

conclusions, e.g., “It is wrong despite the benefits.” However, consequentialism refers to judgments in favor of characteristically consequentialist conclusions, e.g., “Better to save more lives.”

Greene posits that if it turns out that characteristically deontological judgments are driven by emotion, then that raises the possibility that deontological philosophy is also driven by emotion. To say that our deontological philosophy is driven by emotion, in Greene’s view, means that we judge an action permissible because we feel good about it or have positive emotion towards it. Greene’s account, which assumes a contentious Humean theory of motivation, posits that cognitive representations are inherently neutral representations, in the sense that they do not automatically trigger particular behavioral responses or dispositions. In contrast, *emotions* have automatic effects and are behaviorally valenced.

Greene found that answering moral dilemmas in a consequentialist manner takes longer and that fMRI shows greater frontal-lobe activity (associated with cognitive processing) correlated to these judgments. In fact, Greene found that such responses revealed greater activity in *some* areas of the frontal lobe, particularly the Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC). By contrast, answering moral dilemmas in a deontological manner happens more quickly and fMRI also shows that there is a correlation between the brain activity in the frontal lobe, but a different part associated with emotional processing in the amygdala, Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (VMPFC), Default Mode Network (DMN), Temporoparietal Junction (TPJ), and these judgments (Greene 2015).

In their most well-known example, Greene and his colleagues try to explain the typical pattern of responses to the “trolley dilemma.” It is characteristically deontological to judge that an agent may not push an innocent person to his death as a means of saving five others (the footbridge scenario). It is characteristically consequentialist to judge that an agent *may* divert a threatening vehicle from a track containing five innocents to a track containing one innocent (the switch scenario).⁴

Greene takes the psychological evidence to suggest that the thought of pushing someone to his death in an “up close and personal” manner (as in the footbridge scenario) is more emotionally *salient* than the thought of bringing about similar consequences in a more impersonal way (e.g., by hitting a switch, as in the switch scenario). Greene’s rationale for distinguishing between *personal* and *impersonal* forms of harm is largely evolutionary: he says that “up close and personal” violence has been around for a very

4. In a different manner, there are some philosophers such as Kamm (1991) who interpret the trolley problems as a matter of the doctrine of double effect rather than utilitarianism vs. deontology.

long time, reaching far back into our primate lineage (Wrangham and Peterson 1996). In contrast, when harm is impersonal, it fails to trigger this alarm-like emotional response, allowing people to respond in a more “cognitive” way—perhaps because it involves a cognitive mechanism not present in our evolutionary past.

Crucially, Greene and his colleagues argue that the difference between these responses lies in our *moral emotions*. In personal dilemmas, the harm is *obvious, physical* and the harmed victim is *salient* in the sense that the harm done to him/her is *obviously* relevant. However, in non-personal dilemmas the harm is more *abstract* and the harm to the victim is *not salient*. Based on this distinction, they hypothesised that often, personal moral dilemmas trigger negative morally emotional responses, and that these emotional responses cause moral judgments. They also hypothesised that non-personal dilemmas do not trigger emotional responses. Moreover, subjects who gave an unusually consequentialist response to personal dilemmas (e.g., judging it is permissible to push the stranger) took longer to respond than subjects giving the typical response (Greene, Morelli et al. 2008). This suggests that the unusual respondents experienced some *cognitive* conflict when they were thinking it through (Greene 2008, 63).

Greene and his colleagues argue that deontological patterns of moral judgment are driven by emotional responses, while consequentialist judgments are driven by cognitive processes. Greene suggests that deontology is a kind of “moral confabulation.” We have strong feelings that tell us in clear and uncertain terms that some things *simply cannot be done* and that other things *simply must be done*. But it is not obvious how to make sense of these feelings, and so we, with the help of some especially creative philosophers, make up a rationally appealing story. The story is there are these things called “rights” which people have, and when someone has a right, you cannot do anything that would take it away or violate it (Greene 2008, 64).

In contrast, consequentialism, in Greene’s view, is more “cognitive,” in the sense that it is by nature systematic and aggregative. All consequentialist decision-making is a matter of balancing competing concerns, taking into account as much information as is practically feasible. The advantage of having cognitive neutral representations is that they can be mixed and matched in a particular situation without pulling the agent in multiple behavioral directions at once. Thus, the cognitive representations enable us to have highly flexible behavior (in contrast to emotional deontology-driven response).

Greene has introduced additional features in more recent statements of his view. But we need not concern ourselves with these here, since Singer’s argument (my main target)

relies on Greene's early work.⁵ Before getting to that argument, let us briefly consider Haidt's social psychological research.

2.2 Jonathan Haidt's *Righteous Mind*

Jonathan Haidt directs attention to psychological studies of the relationship between moral reasoning and intuition (Haidt 2001 and 2007; Haidt and Björklund 2008). Haidt, among other psychologists, distinguishes between two cognitive processes: the *unconscious* intuitive process and the *conscious* rational one (Bargh 1994; Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Sloman 1996; Stanovich and West 2000; Wilson 2002). He says, in this vein, that moral intuition is

the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike), without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion. Moral intuition is therefore the psychological process that the Scottish philosophers talked about, a process akin to aesthetic judgment. One sees or hears about an event and one instantly feels approval or disapproval (2001, 818).

In Haidt's view, intuitions in fact control our daily moral judgments in a *rapid* and *immediate* way. Haidt, like Greene, claims that if you ask people to *try* reasoning, they merely *confabulate* plausible-sounding rationalisations, which in fact bear no fixed relationship to their actual response. Hence, claims Haidt, this shows that reasoning was *unnecessary* to the process that produced the intuition.

In *The Righteous Mind* and his famous paper, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," Haidt uses subjects' responses to thought experiments concerning societal taboos (e.g., incest, and bestiality) to demonstrate a phenomenon he dubs "moral dumbfounding." In many moral situations, when we do not have any further arguments and have run out of reasons, we say "intuitively" that the action is simply wrong. For example, imagine that a brother and sister start having sex and they both feel it brings them closer as siblings. Most people have very strong negative reaction about this scenario. Their intuitions say that this is morally wrong yet cannot explain why.

Haidt maintains that the majority of our moral reasoning is a kind of *post hoc* reasoning. Although people often have an intuition that incest is wrong, they do not

5. As an alternative view and criticism of Greene, see Sauer (2012).

have a reason for that. Rather, they seek to rationalise their intuition after it occurs to them. In order to explain this, Haidt refers to the findings of neuroscience to show that the *ventro-medial* area of the prefrontal cortex of the brain (associated with automatic heuristics which are often emotional) effectively houses these moral intuitions.⁶

In a nutshell, according to Haidt, most of our daily moral judgments are intuitive in the sense that reasoning and conscious deliberation do not make any contribution to our moral judgments, directly.⁷ In Haidt's view, *unconscious emotional* processing is responsible for most of our ordinary moral judgment.

Having discussed the Greene and Haidt research that Singer relies upon,⁸ I now focus on Singer's main debunking argument. I argue that his argument is not justified.

2.3 Singer's Attack: Evolutionary Biology and the Debunking of Moral Intuitions

Singer adds to the psychological work just described by invoking general principles of evolutionary psychology, which he builds toward an *evolutionary debunking* of moral intuition. Singer writes,

Our biology does not prescribe the specific forms our morality takes... Nevertheless, it seems likely that all these different forms are the outgrowth of behavior that exists in social animals, and is the result of the usual evolutionary processes of natural selection. Morality is a natural phenomenon. (2005, 337).

Per Greene and Haidt, our moral intuitions are produced by *emotional* processes. And this mechanism probably evolved in response to the selection pressures faced by our ancestors who lived in small societies.

In Singer's view, moral psychology and evolution together can give us an explanation of how we *have* access to some of our moral intuitions. According to this explanation, we have intuitions because we have a certain psychological mechanism that produces them, and we have that mechanism because of our evolutionary history. Singer then concludes that

6. Greene (2013; 2014; 2015) recently makes clearer in his formulation of his argument that the VMPFC is not just associated with emotions but with automatic heuristics which are often emotional.

7. For alternative views and criticism of Haidt, see Pizarro and Bloom (2003), Salzman and Kasachoff (2004), Sauer (2012a), Railton (2014) and Musschenga (2008 & 2009).

8. Haidt, unlike Greene, does not think emotional moral intuitions are specifically deontological. However, they both think that commonsense moral intuitions are largely emotion-driven.

while I have claimed that evolutionary theory explains much of common morality, including the central role of duties to our kin, and of duties related to reciprocity, I do not claim that this justifies these elements of common morality. ... Advances in our understanding of ethics do not themselves directly imply any normative conclusions, but they undermine some conceptions of doing ethics which themselves have normative conclusions. Those conceptions of ethics tend to be too respectful of our intuitions. Our better understanding of ethics gives us grounds for being less respectful of them (2005, 343 & 349).

Singer's main debunking argument against moral intuition can be articulated as follows:

(P1) The content of certain human systems of morality (i.e., commonsense deontological morality, egoistic intuitions, and intuitions favouring kinship or reciprocal altruism) is shaped by evolutionary processes.⁹

(P2) If the content of such moral intuitions is shaped by evolutionary processes that have nothing to do with moral truth, we have no reason to believe that our moral intuitions reflect any rational and universal moral truth.

(C) Therefore, moral intuitions—except act-utilitarian intuitions—are epistemologically (and methodologically) unsound and should be discarded.

I wrote “except act-utilitarian intuitions” because Singer recently excludes act-utilitarian intuitions from his debunking argument. In *The Point of View of the Universe* (2014), de Lazari-Radek and Singer extensively argue that evolution cannot explain act-utilitarian intuitions (Singer and de Lazari-Radek 2014, Ch. 3&7).¹⁰ Instead, they believe evolution can explain moral intuitions commonly seen as opposed to strict utilitarianism, such as those favouring altruism towards family and those requiring reciprocity. They write,

Evolution explains altruism towards kin by seeing it as promoting the survival of the genes we carry. We can do this in many ways, but in

9. For an alternative view, see Kahane (2011) and Tropman (2014).

10. For an alternative view, see Hooker (2016).

normal circumstances, we will do it best by living a long life, finding a mate or mates, having children, and acquiring the resources, status, or power that will improve the prospects of our children and other close kin surviving, reproducing, and in turn promoting the survival of their children (2014, 194).

Thus, based on Singer's debunking argument, since moral intuitions (except act-utilitarian intuitions) are the product of the specific sort of evolutionary processes responsible for these moral intuitions, they had better be explained away.

2.3.1 Emotion as the Lynchpin of Singer's Argument

A natural response to Singer is to insist that deontological moral principles may be right *even if* their support comes from intuitions that are shaped by evolutionary forces. Suppose that Singer is right and so our deontological intuitions are caused by evolutionary forces. Suppose as well that there's no *positive* reason to believe that evolutionary forces have much to do with the moral truth. All this shows is that we are unable to provide *positive* reason for believing that the causal process behind deontological intuitions is hooked up to moral truth. This *does not* show that deontological intuitions are false. They *may* very well be true; it is just that we cannot demonstrate grounds for trusting their reliability.¹¹

Singer's position would be more convincing if we had evidence that deontological intuitions are caused not by a process of uncertain reliability, but by a process of demonstrated proneness to error. The difference here is between relying upon an untested telescope that was made by a process that has nothing to do with making a good telescope and relying upon a telescope that we *know* has produced bad measurements in the past. So far, Singer has only shown that our moral intuitions are an untested telescope. But he wishes to go farther: he wishes to show that our intuitions are demonstrably prone to errors.

This is the point of introducing the Haidt and Greene research. Singer wants to claim that this research shows that our intuitions are caused by *emotional* psychological processes. And emotion, he supposes, is known to be a distorting factor. Evolution is

11. Note that Singer is not just saying commonsense intuitions are emotionally driven but that they are driven by morally-irrelevant factors. Singer (and Greene) have recently come to emphasize it. For a related argument, see Street (2006) and Joyce (2000).

simply disconnected from truth, but emotion is thought to be an active barrier to truthful perception. Singer writes,

If, however, Greene is right to suggest that our intuitive responses are due to differences in the emotional pull of situations that involve bringing about someone's death in a close-up, personal way, and bringing about the same person's death in a way that is at a distance, and less personal, why should we believe that there is anything that justifies these responses? (2005, 347).

Of course, not everyone agrees with Singer that emotions as such are distorting (Mason 2011; Lenman 2015).¹² The rest of this paper will argue that we can have reason to trust our moral intuitions *even if* they are caused by emotion-linked brain processes. In the next section, I introduce three empirical cases to bridge the gap between the psychology and epistemology of moral intuitions.

3. Emotion and Intuition: Empirical Evidence

Given what Singer argues, let us grant that our moral intuitions are the product of mechanisms that evolved, and that they are mediated through emotional processes, as suggested by the research of Greene and Haidt. However, there is a gap between the psychology of moral intuitions that Singer endorses and the epistemological-methodological consequences he wants to infer. Although Singer supposes that moral intuitions are the product of emotional processes with a certain kind of evolutionary history, he is not clear why that should make them unfitting as a basis for moral judgments. Singer writes,

Haidt's behavioral research and Greene's brain imaging studies suggest the possibility of distinguishing between our immediate emotionally based responses, and our more reasoned conclusions (2005, 349-350).

Singer here seems to presuppose a familiar sort of purely rationalist picture about moral intuitions according to which the presence of any degree or type of emotion distorts intuitive judgments. Such a pure rationalistic account of moral intuitions might be attractive to ethicists who thought that our moral judgments should derive from pure reason (e.g., Kant or Sidgwick, on some interpretations). If emotion is generally

12. Singer might object that it is not emotions as such, but emotions that are sensitive to distance that are a problem.

a distorting factor in moral thinking, then it is better not to attend to those moral judgments that are mediated through emotional processes.

However, there are problems with this pure rationalistic account of moral intuition. I will now raise three empirically-based objections to this picture:

(1) The first objection is that the distinction between emotional and reasoned responses itself is not as clear-cut as it appeared in Singer's, Greene's and Haidt's work. In fact, dividing up intuitive moral judgments into "emotionally-based ones" and "more reasoned ones" might not be possible. Defending a grey-area account of moral intuitions between emotion and reason seems more tenable (Fine 2006; Kennett and Fine 2009). For example, many researchers in cognitive science claim that at least *some* emotion has a *cognitive* component (Lazarus 1991; Scherer 1997; Prinz and Nichols 2010, 118). That cognitive component is, indeed, presumed to be an evaluative judgment. The view usually says that emotions are a species of evaluative judgment, not that all evaluative judgments are emotions. For instance, "shame" might comprise the judgment that there has been damage to one's well-being together with a distinctive feeling or motivational state. So, if this is the case for shame, then having some emotions with cognitive elements can be a helpful rather than a distorting factor for our intuitions. This however does not entail that *all* emotions have a cognitive element.¹³

Of course, this view of the relationship between emotion and cognition is also contentious. But that is the point. Singer seems to assume that cognitive scientists have readily to hand a reliable distinction between emotion and cognition. But cognitive scientists are far from agreed upon how to draw such a distinction, or whether one is tenable at all. For example, Haidt himself recently dropped talk of emotion from his social intuitionist account, mainly for this reason (Haidt 2013, Ch. 1). Greene also recently backed away from his earlier account, acknowledging that emotion plays some role in consequentialist intuition as well (Greene 2014).

(2) The second problem with the pure rationalistic account of moral intuition is that even if we can divide moral judgments into emotional intuitions and reasoned intuitions, there is very little reason to think that, as a general psychological law, emotion *always* distorts our intuitive judgments. It seems likely, on the contrary, that the relationship between emotion and intuitive judgments will be different from case to case. For some cases, we may indeed do worse when our judgments are influenced by emotion. But in others, emotion may in fact be *necessary* for *good* intuitive judgment.

13. For it cannot be right that emotions are all truth-apt. It is absurd to claim that emotions can be inserted into valid forms of argument like *modus ponens*.

Some of the work of Antonio Damasio and the famous case of Phineas Gage suggest just that (Damasio 1994, 3-10).¹⁴ Gage and Damasio's patients suffered from the attenuation of "somatic markers" and injuries in some of the emotional regions of their brains (i.e., VMPFC).¹⁵ As a result, although these people are normal in intelligence and semantic knowledge, they show weaknesses in what we might consider practical rationality, e.g., taking what seem to be risks and doing poorly in gambling tasks. Damasio takes these patients to show that emotions sometimes carry important information about the environment and have a vital role in our reasoning.

For example, in a rigged game experiment (the Iowa Gambling Task), players were shown four decks of cards. They turned over cards from the decks, in any order they wanted. Some cards paid money (\$50 or \$100), though some were penalties instead. Two decks were "good," producing lower benefits but a higher total pay-out and two decks were "bad," producing large earnings but greater total costs. Players were not given any explicit information about the existence of "good" and "bad" decks.

The study involved two groups of players—subjects without brain damage and patients with damage to *ventro-medial* prefrontal cortex. Normal players implicitly understood the distribution after turning about 50 cards, most of them concluded that "Two decks are good, and two are bad." The patients with brain damage, however, never understood. While people played, researchers measured skin conductance responses during the gambling task and they recognized that "the frontally damaged subjects did not have the feelings necessary for rational action" (Damasio 1994, 212-217). They also found that these people showed no emotional response during the game. Damasio believes that after their brain injury, the brain-damaged patients tended to make poor financial and personal decisions and have difficulty with moral judgments.¹⁶

Here we have a case where emotions, far from being a distorting factor, are actually *essential* to good judgment. If this is the case for practical rationality, then it might also be the case for the moral domain. That requires a tendentious assumption, but the point is that we just do not know enough about the relationship between emotional processes and good intuitive judgment to decide one way or the other. The pure rationalistic picture, although perhaps appealing, is not well supported by the psychological facts.

14. For more details of Gage's case, see also Damasio (1994, Chs. 1&2).

15. Again, the VMPFC is not just associated with emotion and an emotional deficit is not what's distinctive of patients with VMPFC damage. It's the attenuation of "somatic markers" that inform personal decision-making.

16. For more details about emotions and feelings, see Damasio (1999, Ch. 2&9).

So, the fact that moral intuitions are produced by emotional processes is not enough to require doubts about them.

(3) The third empirical response to Singer can be derived from social psychology. Some social psychologists claim that moral intuitions, like other intuitions which come naturally in social situations, are more reliable than conscious deliberative judgments under certain conditions. To explain this, these psychologists mostly appeal to what is called “social cognition,” the ability to process, store, and apply information about other people, especially in social interactions. The development of social cognition, these psychologists believe, is tightly connected with the development of “social emotions.” It is widely accepted that social emotions are communicated to other people and generally shape our social processes (Hareli and Parkinson 2008). Theorists often include emotions such as shame, embarrassment and jealousy as social emotions, because these depend upon awareness of other people’s mental states. In contrast, basic emotions such as happiness and sadness need only the awareness of one’s own mental state.

Since most psychologists think of moral intuition as something like social cognition and social emotion, they believe that moral intuitions help us in navigating our social world. We can draw some conclusions about moral intuition from the observation that moral intuition has a subject matter, emotional effect, and role that is shared with social cognition and emotion. For example, according to the philosopher Woodward and the psychologist Allman (2007), one of the roles of social emotions or moral intuitions is to help people to circumvent the limits of analytical, rule-based, or reason-based decision-making procedures such as cost-benefit analysis. They hold that the number of different dimensions or different kinds of considerations that human beings are able to fully take into account in explicit conscious rule or reason-guided decision-making is fairly *small*. In support of this claim, Woodward and Allman refer to recent studies by the psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis and his colleagues (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren and van Baaren 2006).

Dijksterhuis and colleagues differentiate between *mode* of thought (conscious vs. unconscious), *complexity* of thought, and *quality* of choice. Complexity is defined as the amount of information a choice is based on. They hypothesised that conscious thought, because of its precision, leads to good quality choices in simple matters. However, because of its low capacity, conscious thought leads to worse quality choices with more complex issues. On the other hand, unconscious thought, because of its relative lack of precision, is expected to lead to choices of lower quality generally. However, since the quality of unconscious thought does not worsen with increased complexity, in complex circumstances, unconscious thought can actually lead to better quality choices than conscious thought.

Dijksterhuis and his colleagues investigated this hypothesis in experiments that compared the quality of choices under different conditions. Some participants were not given the opportunity to think at all before choosing between alternatives. Others were able to consciously think a short time before choosing, and others were distracted for a brief period before choosing, during which they could engage in what Dijksterhuis and his colleagues called “unconscious thought.”

For example, in one of Dijksterhuis’s experiments (2004), participants were given information about four hypothetical apartments in their home city, Amsterdam. Each apartment had 12 different features, for a total of 48 pieces of information, presented in a random order. One of these four apartments was unambiguously more desirable than the others. After the participants read the huge amount of information, they were asked to choose which one was better. Interestingly, only the “unconscious thinkers” reported the appropriate preference for the desirable apartment. The participants who engaged in conscious thinking could not specify a preference for the appropriate apartment over the less desirable ones because, as Dijksterhuis explains, their job was too difficult.

Based on Dijksterhuis’s findings, Woodward and Allman claim that unconscious processing—which social emotion can be part of—can sometimes lead to better judgments than conscious deliberation such as in reason-based decisions. They also argue that there is a similarity between social intuitions and moral intuitions, because social cognition, social emotion, and moral intuition have overlapping subject matters and roles (namely, helping us navigate our social world). Hence, it is possible to draw a conclusion about the reliability of moral intuitions from studies on the reliability of social intuitions. If Woodward and Allman are right, we can assume that emotional moral intuitions will at least sometimes lead to judgments or decisions that are superior to those arrived at on the basis of more deliberative, rule and reason-based decision-making strategies (Woodward and Allman 2007, 185).

Singer appeals to cognitive science to cast doubt on emotion-linked moral intuitions. But I have just surveyed three distinct psychological programs suggesting that such an inference is too hasty. Emotions sometimes do not work as a distorting factor and thus cannot ruin moral intuition’s epistemic status. In the next section, I build upon the empirical evidence by providing a philosophical account of how emotion and moral intuition can sit comfortably beside each other without epistemic threat.

4. Integrating the Psychology and Epistemology of Moral Intuition

In discussion of intuition, philosophers often distinguish two issues from each other: issues regarding the epistemology of intuition, which deals with questions such as “does intuition justify?,” and issues regarding the psychology of intuition, which deals with questions such as “what is intuition?” and “how can intuition be related to emotions?” Some of these philosophers, such as Sinnott-Armstrong, believe that the psychology and epistemology of intuition should be differentiated because the epistemology of intuition is normative and is related to *when* beliefs are justified. This is a different question than the psychological question of *how* beliefs are formed, though it may be possible to use the answer to the psychological question to inform the answer to the epistemological question (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, 50). My account aims at an integrated perspective on the psychology and epistemology of intuition.

I start from the idea that intuition is a kind of non-doxastic *intellectual seeming*, similar to perceptual experiences (Bealer 1998; Huemer 2005).¹⁷ The experience of an intuition includes phenomenological features such as a feeling, appropriateness, familiarity, or confidence. I then introduce an account of emotions as non-doxastic quasi-perceptual states. When both these elements are in view, we can explain how intuition and emotion can be combined.

We can divide accounts of intuition into those that are doxastic (having to do with belief) and those that are non-doxastic (having to do with non-inferential impression of truth). On the doxastic view, moral intuitions are regarded as non-inferred beliefs about self-evident propositions based on adequate understanding, with this understanding sufficient for their justification.¹⁸ Therefore, on the doxastic view, intuitions are belief-like states (Lewis 1983, x; Audi 2008, 478).¹⁹ To have the intuition that *p* is to have the non-inferential, pre-theoretical and firm belief that *p*. Adopting this account can explain what intuitions are without introducing a new mental kind or phenomenon; that is, it explains intuition in terms of an already *familiar* mental state, i.e., *belief*.

17. I follow Bealer’s intellectual seeming account of intuition here. However, Bealer is not talking about moral intuition in particular. He is giving an account of philosophical intuition in general. I elsewhere use Bealer’s account of intellectual seeming to give an account of *moral* intuition. See Dabbagh (2018).

18. I elsewhere criticised this conception of self-evidence based on “sufficient understanding.” See Dabbagh (2018a).

19. Ernest Sosa (1998) also advocates an account of intuitions as dispositions-to-believe. He reads intuition as disposition-to-believe merely on the basis of adequate understanding.

Alternatively, on the non-doxastic view, moral intuitions can be explained as seeming states, namely initial intellectual seemings. To have the intuition that p is to have the intellectual seeming that p . This account defines intuitions as seemings, or as Bealer says “when you have an intuition that A , it seems to you that A ” (1992, 101). This kind of seeming is also intellectual rather than perceptual, sensory or introspective, for one can have a certain intuition without having a perception or introspection at all (Bealer 1992, 101f; Pust 2000, 36&45; Sosa 1998, 258f). Thus, when S intuits that p , it intellectually seems to S that p .

I focus on the non-doxastic seeming account, because this has the advantage of being able to integrate the epistemology and psychology of moral intuition (Musschenga 2010).²⁰ The seeming view can answer both the epistemological question of “does moral intuition justify?” and the psychological question of “what is moral intuition?”

The seeming account supports an analogy between moral intuition and perceptual experience.²¹ Some epistemologists say that perceptual experiences are “translucent presentations,” meaning that “a presentational state σ of x *translucent* iff, in having σ , it is presented to x that p is so, and there is no content q (where $q \neq p$) such that it seems to x that p is presented as being so by q ’s being presented as being so” (Bengson 2010, 38). According to Bengson, calling intuitions translucent is a way of saying that intuitions are direct (or non-inferred).²²

Moral intuitions are plausibly understood as translucent presentations because insofar as one adequately understands the conceptual constituents of a proposition, one can be immediately struck by its seeming rightness. Consideration of moral propositions produces intellectual seemings with moral content. In effect, what makes an intuition a

20. Note that this does not entail that doxastic views do not have a *psychological* theory of intuition. Audi for example claims that we have to distinguish two different things: believing in a proposition as a psychological state and believing that the content of that proposition is justified. See Audi (1997, 44-49).

21. Hanno Sauer (2012b & 2017) also made similar point that emotional moral intuitions can be analogous to perceptual experiences in justifying moral beliefs non-inferentially. However, my point here is that moral intuition is like intellectual seemings and moral emotion is like perceptual experiences. Seemings and perceptual experiences can justify moral belief non-inferentially.

22. There is a distinction in philosophy of perception between “translucent” and “transparent.” The distinction picks out as translucent a class of experiences that are not completely direct or non-inferred. By contrast, transparent experiences are direct or non-inferred. For example, when I look at a tree or when I introspect my visual experience, my experience is transparent to me (Smith 2008). For my purposes, this distinction is not at stake; I will include “transparent” experiences under the “translucent” heading.

moral one is an intellectual seeming with moral content. Like perceptual states, moral intuitions appear to provide non-inferential justification for beliefs (Dancy 2014).

How does emotion relate to the seeming account of moral intuition? Following Tolhurst (1998) and Pryor (2000), seemings have some connection with “feeling” in the sense that when it seems to us that *p*, we are in a mental state which has a property of “feel as if,” “feel of truth,” “felt givenness” or “feel of veridicality.” When we feel that the content of a seeming is true, we have the feeling of felt veridicality. These “feelings” are markers of particular phenomenological states. This aspect of perceptual phenomenology has “phenomenal force,” and it is a justification-making feature of mental states (Huemer 2001).²³ The distinctive characters of particular emotions are also features of phenomenological states, such as the “feeling of sadness” or “feeling of joy.” Since epistemologists are willing to credit “felt veridicality,” why not “felt joyfulness” or “felt relief” as indicators of some feature of the environment? Thus, the perceptual phenomenology of “feelings” gives us an explanation of how particular emotions’ phenomenological features can relate to the seeming account.

If I can show that some emotional experiences are like perceptual experiences (similar to moral intuition), we then have a case that moral intuition and emotion can go hand in hand. I can show that emotional experiences can be a potential cause for non-inferential moral belief (Tolhurst 1990). This will provide us a philosophical theory rather than empirical evidence to support the idea that although moral intuition and emotion are different, they can sit comfortably beside each other without epistemic threat.

Note that although I will say that emotions are like perceptual experience and moral intuition is like perceptual experience, this does not entail that these two perception-like states are connected in *every* respect and *all* emotions are connected to intuition. All I want to show is that there is a possibility that *some* emotions that are similar to perceptual experiences might be connected to moral intuitions in a way that both of them can form non-inferential beliefs.

4.1 Quasi-Perceptualist Theory of Emotion

In recent years, attention has been paid to the development of neo-judgmentalist and perceptual theories of emotions. For example, people like Brady (2009), Doring (2003), Prinz (2006) and Roberts (2003) hold that emotional experiences (e.g., guilt and indignation) can be similar to *affective construals, appearances and perceptions of value*

23. Some moral intuitionists like Ross allow that a moral judgment can express a feeling of approval. See Stratton-Lake (2002, 14). For more on Ross, see also Dababagh (2018b).

in that they can represent the world of value. The view is that emotions *perceptually* represent value.²⁴ Jesse Prinz, for instance, argues that sentimentalism can vindicate intuitionism. He writes,

intuitionists believe that moral judgments are self-justifying... they seem to base this assertion on the phenomenology of moral judgments: moral judgments seem self-evident... far from opposing intuitionism, sentimentalism offers one of the most promising lines of defense... sentimentalism explains the phenomenology driving intuitionism, and it shows how intuitionism might be true (2006, 37).²⁵

Prinz believes that sentimentalism can offer a defence of intuitionism because sentimentalism can explain the phenomenology of intuition. Moral intuitions do not need further justification and in this respect, they are similar to certain perceptual experiences. Likewise, emotionally grounded judgments are like perceptual experiences that do not need independent support. In effect, if moral judgments are sentimental, then the judgment that “promise-keeping is right” is self-justifying because promise-keeping generates the positive sentiment expressed by that judgment. The power to generate such positive sentiments is constitutive of being right.

Perceptual theorists generally believe that occurrent emotions are intentional and representational with a certain phenomenal character. It is natural to think that construals, appearances and perceptions are non-doxastic states. So, it is possible to draw an analogy between emotional experiences and perceptual-like states. Following Kauppinen (2013), I call this the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion. According to

*The Quasi-Perceptualist Account of Emotion: Some emotional experience can be similar to non-doxastic states such as perceptual-like states.*²⁶

Emotions, like perceptions, can come into conflict with our beliefs and judgments. Just like in the Müller-Lyer visual illusion, we might have “conflict” between our “recalcitrant

24. This perceptual view differs from the James-Lange’s perceptual theory of emotions in which emotions are constituted by perceptions of bodily changes. See James (1884).

25. Gibbard (2002) also argues that ethical expressivism needs moral intuitions.

26. We can also make a distinction between literal perceptual theories and non-literal ones. Literal ones hold that emotions literally are perceptual states, while non-literal theories hold that there are deep and explanatory analogies between perception and emotion. This distinction is drawn in Brady (2013).

emotion” and belief (Doring 2008). Recalcitrant emotions are emotions that are in tension with the subjects’ settled judgment. For example, suppose I judge that my brother’s action is justified but I envy him at the same time, or I fear something whilst knowing that it is harmless (D’Arms and Jacobson 2003).²⁷ The conflict between emotion and judgment provides us with good reason to construe emotional experiences as non-doxastic states. Importantly, this sort of conflict is rational without contradiction. As Doring (2003) points out, it is coherent to be afraid of the snake that we know is not dangerous.²⁸

Although the account of emotion that I defend here is non-doxastic, this does not entail that emotions are essentially non-cognitive (Prinz 2008). It is true that emotions have non-cognitive components, but it is not the case that these non-cognitive elements must have constant association with the emotion in question. For example, in the case of imagining some emotion, e.g., fear of something, non-cognitive components such as bodily states are not necessarily involved. As we shall see, emotions (e.g., compassion and shame) can involve evaluative thoughts, perception and judgment. Acknowledging this point does not require fully endorsing judgmentalist theories of the emotions according to which evaluative judgments are identical to, or are necessary constituents of, emotions (Nussbaum 2001, Ch. 1; Solomon 1977).

But if the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion is true, our moral beliefs *can* be based on emotional experience. Emotional experiences can be treated as evidence for epistemic and rational beliefs. However, the rationality of the emotions is contentious. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong endorses the irrationality of the emotions (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006a). He believes that emotions are an epistemologically distorting factor that threaten the possibility of a non-inferential justification in ethics.²⁹ Even Huemer, as a proponent of epistemological intuitionism, believes that emotion distorts moral judgment. He writes,

[E]motions are known to impair judgment with respect to (other) factual questions, so, assuming the truth of moral realism, it is *prima*

27. They believe that the existence of “recalcitrant emotions” give us reason to reject theories of emotion that treat judgments as necessary components of emotions. However, as Roberts writes, recalcitrant emotions cannot be in tension with the cognitive part of our judgments unless they have “a character that can be expressed in thoughts” (2003, 111). See also Lacewing (2006).

28. Compare Gendler’s idea of alief, which may be in tension with explicit belief. See Gendler (2008).

29. I elsewhere argued against Sinnott-Armstrong’s understanding of non-inferentiality. See Dabbagh (2017).

facie reasonable to assume that emotions impair our moral judgment as well (2008, 378).

However, cognitive sciences, as I argued above, show us that seeing all emotions in this excessively pessimistic way is not plausible. To think about emotional experience as always being a source of epistemic distortion would be wrong. On the contrary, there are some reasons to believe that emotional experiences can sometimes make a positive contribution to our activities in practical rationality.³⁰ So, there is a possibility that some emotions are not distorting factors. If this is right, we are no longer justified in saying that emotions *always* distort our epistemic activities. Instead, emotions (construed as quasi-perceptual experiences) might have some cognitive elements assessable for rationality. Let us explain how emotional experiences can be assessable for rationality.

In different theories of emotion, including the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion, it is widely endorsed that emotions are representational states which can depict the world in a certain way (Doring 2003 & 2007; Roeser 2011). Therefore, emotional experiences can be rationally assessed as appropriate or inappropriate. For instance, when we say, “his anger is not appropriate” or “his fear is justified,” we mean that the emotion is in a way representing the way the (evaluative) world happens to be. On the other hand, we can have non-inferential justification for believing moral propositions on the basis of having emotional experiences (construed as non-doxastic states). For example, our fear can justify us in believing that we are in danger. Furthermore, while emotions can form non-inferential beliefs, we can ask why we have some emotions, and thus we can offer sufficient reasons—if it is needed—for them. To have a better idea which kind of emotion we are dealing with, we can appeal to what Scanlon calls “judgment-sensitive attitudes.” These attitudes, Scanlon writes, are ones that

an ideally rational person would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them, and that would, in an ideally rational person, ‘extinguish’ when that person judged them not to be supported by reasons of the appropriate kind (1998, 20).

Beliefs, fear, respect, anger, and contempt, according to Scanlon, are all such judgment-sensitive attitudes. Just like judgment-sensitive attitudes, the emotions we deal with

30. I do not deny that some emotions can distort. But how do we tell the difference between the distorting ones and the non-distorting ones? Although this question is very important, I will not discuss it in this paper as it needs much more psychological background than can be provided in this space. For current purposes, it is enough to show that at least *some* emotions are not distorting.

here are “emotions as consequences of judgments” in the sense that, for example, fear is an emotion “for which reasons can sensibly be asked or offered” (Ibid). This must be distinguished from mere feelings such as hunger. Following Jones’s (2003) discussion of *reason-tracking*, we can claim that emotions allow us to track reasons in the sense that we can register reasons so that we can behave in accordance with them.³¹ For example, one can argue that we can provide reasons for emotions like perceptual experiences cases—if we see the car is red, we can say that it looks red to us.

So, emotions can be appropriate for rationality in three ways: emotions represent the way the (evaluative) world happens to be. Emotions form non-inferential moral belief. Furthermore, a rational person can offer reasons—if it is needed—for having some emotions.³²

To summarize: insofar as moral intuition (construed as intellectual seeming) can form non-inferential moral beliefs, there can be some emotions which form non-inferential beliefs and in doing that they are like moral intuitions because they both are similar to perceptual experiences.

However, suppose one objects that if this is the case, the general worry still remains because these emotions *can* distort when they cause judgments. But this objection ignores the possibility of correction. Suppose we become convinced that some particular emotion-based judgment or belief is distorted because the underlying emotion turns out to be unreliable in this case. We can then recover by adjusting our belief in response to other available evidence, e.g., having confirmation from a third party. Does this make our initial belief inferentially justified? No. The generation of our initial belief is non-inferential even if maintaining it under certain challenges requires inference (Ballantyne and Thurow 2013). This places us in agreement with moral intuitionists who think that emotional experience can generate non-inferential justification (McCann 2007). Audi writes in this regard that

[E]motions may reveal what is right or wrong before judgment articulates it; and they may both support ethical judgment and spur moral conduct (2004, 57).

31. In Jones’s words, a reason-tracker is “capable of registering reasons and behaving in accordance with them, but it need possess neither the concept of a reason nor have a self-conception. It thus need not have the higher-order reflective capacities characteristic of reason responders” (2003, 190).

32. For an alternative view see Brady (2010). Although Brady defends a perceptual theory of emotion, he criticises the epistemological use of emotion as justifying beliefs.

Let us go back to the main issue with which this section started. I asked whether emotional experiences can go hand in hand with my favoured theory of moral intuition, i.e., seeming theory. My answer is yes.³³ Here is the reason: according to the seeming account of intuitions, moral intuitions are in some relevant ways similar to perceptual experiences that offer non-inferential justification. The quasi-perceptualist account of emotion also treats emotions as non-doxastic states similar to perceptual states that can be assessable for rationality. The quasi-perceptualist account of emotion offers non-inferential justification for moral belief based on emotional experiences. Therefore, moral intuitions and some emotional experiences are similar to perceptual experiences in offering non-inferential justification. Moral intuition and emotion can be partners rather than contestants, with emotion as a source of insight rather than distortion.

To conclude, although moral intuition, emotion and perceptual experience are different, they are at a certain level of abstraction parallel. In the case of moral intuition, we can say that “whereas x has the perceptual experience as if p iff it is transluently sensorily presented to x that p, x has the [moral] intuition that p iff it is transluently intellectually presented to x that p” (Bengson 2010, 92). Likewise, while x has the *perceptual experience* as if p iff it is transluently sensorily presented to x that p, x has the *emotional experience* that p iff it is transluently emotionally presented to x that p. Of course, emotions *can* be misleading. So, can moral intuitions. So, can perceptual experiences. That they are misleading in some cases does not gainsay that they are sources of knowledge in other cases.

Therefore, the seeming account of moral intuition and the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion offer an integrated psychology and epistemology of moral intuition. These two accounts can explain what a moral intuition is, how emotion can be related to intuition and how each of them can offer non-inferential justification for belief.

Conclusion

I have shown in this paper that Singer’s argument is not justified epistemologically. Some empirical results weaken the empirical psychologists’ argument against moral intuition. I argued that the seeming account of moral intuition could team up with an account of moral emotion. Not only intuition but also emotion can offer non-inferential justification. The fact that the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion treats emotions as potential (rational) sources of non-inferential beliefs offers a reply to criticisms raised

33. Robert Cowan (2012) also in his PhD thesis defended an account of emotion for moral intuitionism.

by experimentalists that emotions are always distorting factors. Embracing the seeming account of moral intuition and the quasi-perceptualist account of emotion, I can conclude that (i) moral intuitions are intellectual seemings similar to perceptual experiences, (ii) emotional experiences can be similar to perceptual experiences, and (iii) just as perceptual experiences provide non-inferential justification for belief, so do moral intuitions and emotions.

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