

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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[Handout #14]

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology”

§ Main Theses

- 1. Some recent research in psychology and brain science show that moral beliefs are partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion and have dubious origins. Hence they are unreliable in their own rights.**
- 2. Since moral intuitions are unreliable, they should not be used as the sole basis of one’s moral judgment (a normative claim).**
- 3. The need for independent confirmation of our moral beliefs undermines moral intuitionism.**

§ Skepticism in Moral Epistemology

The Skeptic’s *Regress* Argument

1. A believer is justified in believing something only if he or she has a reason that is expressible in an inference with premises that he or she is already justified in believing.
2. This requires a chain of inferences that must (either)
 - (i) continue infinitely,
 - (ii) close into a circle, or
 - (iii) stop arbitrarily.
3. But (according to the skeptics) all three options are not acceptable.
4. Therefore, there is no way for anyone to be justified in believing anything.

§ Moral Intuitionism in Moral Epistemology

[Moral intuitionism]:

Moral intuitionism is the claim that some people are adequately epistemically justified in holding some moral beliefs independently of whether those people are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs.

Explanation:

1. Moral intuitionism in this sense is about justified belief.
2. It is a normative theory, not a descriptive theory such as Haidt’s.
3. For some people, their moral intuitions are not inferred and they are justified in holding those intuitions as beliefs.

*** Three kinds of epistemological moral intuitionism:**

Rational intuitionism	Moral sense theory	Reliabilism
Basic moral beliefs are analogous to beliefs in mathematical axioms, which are (taken to be) justified independently of inference.	Some moral beliefs are like perceptual beliefs, which are supposed to be justified independently of inference.	Any belief is justified if it results from a reliable process, regardless of whether that process has anything to do with any inference.

To Show: Moral believers are never justified in holding spontaneous moral beliefs if they lack certain inferential abilities.

*** Sinnott-Armstrong's Master Argument**

1. With all our beliefs, some confirmation needs to be available at least implicitly as information stored somehow in the believer that gives the believer an ability to infer the belief from some other beliefs.
2. There are certain principles for when confirmation is needed for an ordinary belief to be justified, such as when a belief is partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, and explicable by dubious source.
3. The same standards apply to moral beliefs as well.
4. Moral beliefs are partial,
5. Therefore, moral beliefs all need independent confirmation to be justified.
6. According to moral intuitionism, moral intuitions are spontaneous and non-inferred.
7. Therefore, the need for independent confirmation undermines moral intuitionism.

§ The Principles for When Confirmation Is Needed:

Principle 1: [Partiality] confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the believer is partial.

Principle 2: [Disagreement] confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when people disagree with no independent reason to prefer one belief or believer over the other.

Principle 3: [Emotional] confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the believer is emotional in a way that clouds judgment.

Principle 4: [Subject to Illusion] confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the circumstances are conducive to illusion.

Principle 5: [Dubious source] confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the belief arises from an unreliable or disreputable source.

When a belief is partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, and explicable by dubious sources, then all of these principles apply.

§ Why Moral Beliefs Need Confirmation

I. Moral believers are partial.

- 1) Believers can be called partial whenever their beliefs affect their self-interest either directly or indirectly (by affecting the interests of people whom they care about).
- 2) Moral beliefs affect us all.
- 3) Therefore, moral believers are partial.

II. Moral beliefs are often controversial.

- 1) There are plenty of moral disagreements that are not just disagreements on conceptual or factual issues.
- 2) If we know that many moral intuitions are unreliable because others hold conflicting intuitions, then we are not justified in trusting a particular moral intuition without some reason to believe that it is one of the reliable ones.
- 3) Therefore, we are not justified in trusting our own moral intuitions.

III. Moral believers are often clouded by emotions.

- 1) Emotions that cloud judgment create a need for confirmation.
- 2) Empirical studies (by Joshua Greene and colleagues) show that while considering appropriate action in personal dilemmas, subjects showed significant activation in brain areas associated with emotion and under-activation in areas associated with working memory.
- 3) Additional evidence comes from Wheatley and Haidt – They gave participants the post-hypnotic suggestion that they would feel a pang of disgust whenever they saw either the word ‘take’ or the word ‘often’. When a story contained the word that elicited disgust in a participant, that participant was more likely to express stronger moral condemnation of acts in the story.
- 4) Therefore, moral believers need confirmation in order to be justified in holding their moral beliefs.

IV. Moral believers are often subject to the illusion of the context/language

Cases of illusion:

1. Peter Unger found that the order in which options are presented affects beliefs about whether a given option is morally wrong.
 2. People tend to use overgeneralization to particular cases.
 3. When the same case is given different descriptions or framed differently, people often end up with different moral judgments.
- ➔ Because framing effects so often lead to incoherence and error, we cannot be justified in trusting a moral intuition that relies on framing effects unless we at least can be aware that this intuition is inferred from a reason.

V. Moral beliefs often have dubious origins

- 1) The social origins of moral beliefs might be problematic in two ways:
 - (i) moral beliefs might be caused by factors that are unrelated with the truth of those beliefs.
 - (ii) the origins of moral intuitions might be immoral in their own rights.
- 2) Therefore, moral believers need some independent confirmation that their beliefs are not distorted by such disreputable origins.
- 3) Therefore, moral believers should not rely merely on their unconfirmed moral intuitions.

* the dubious origins of our social moral beliefs according to philosophers:

[a] Nietzsche argues that Christian morality results from slaves cleverly overcoming their superiors by reevaluating values.

[b] Foucault argues that moral beliefs express or result from social power relations. Yet these moral beliefs themselves seem to condemn the very kind of power that leads to these beliefs.

[c] Harman's explanation the common moral belief that harming someone is much worse than failing to helping someone in need is the self-interest of the rich and powerful:

The rich and powerful do not need much help and are often in the best position to give it; so, if a strong principle of mutual aid were adopted, they would gain little and lose a great deal, because they would end up doing most of the helping and would receive little in return.

Remember also that rich and powerful people have always controlled the church, the media, and culture, which in turn affect most people's moral beliefs.

§ Conclusion

1. If a moral believer is an educated modern adult, then she should know that many moral beliefs are problematic in the ways indicated by Principles 1–5.
2. She either knows or does not know that her moral belief is an exception to the trend.
3. If she does not know this, she should accept a significant probability that her belief is problematic. Then she cannot be justified without confirmation.
4. Alternatively, if she does know that her moral belief is exceptionally reliable, then she has enough information to draw an inference like this: My moral belief is exceptionally reliable. Exceptionally reliable beliefs are probably true. Therefore, my belief is (probably) true. If this moral believer does not have the information in these premises, then it is hard to see why we should call her justified.
5. So, either way, moral intuitionism fails.