Moral Intuitionism, Experiments and Skeptical Arguments[1]
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Introduction

Over the last decade there have been various attempts to use empirical data about people's dispositions to choose to undermine various moral positions by arguing that our judgements about what to do are unreliable. Usually they are directed at non-consequentialists by consequentialists, but they have also been directed at all moral theories by skeptics about morality. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has been one of the leading proponents of such general skepticism. He has argued that empirical results particularly undermine intuitionist moral epistemology. This paper is an attempt to look at what intuitionists should say in response.

Consider the following argument :
Regress

(R1) If any person S is ever justified in believing a normative claim that *p* then S must be able to infer p from other beliefs of S.

(R2) Any inference must have either (a) no normative premises or (b) some normative premises .

(R3) No person is ever justified in believing a normative claim that *p* by an inference with no normative premises.

(R4) No person S is ever justified in believing a normative claim that *p* by an inference with a normative premise unless S is also justified in believing the normative premise itself.

(R5) No person is ever justified in believing any normative claim *p* by a chain of inferences that includes p as an essential premise.

(R6) No person is ever justified by believing any normative claim *p* by a chain of inferences that go on infinitely.

(R7) No person S can ever be justified in believing a normative claim that *p*.

This sort of argument for skepticism, based on the rejection of justificatory regresses, is familiar to most of us. The formulation here is a simplified version of an argument from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's *Moral Skepticisms*.[2] It usefully highlights the attractions of normative intuitionism as providing a way to avoid regresses without lapsing into skepticism. Most current moral intuitionists deny the first premise of this argument and thus avoid it's conclusion. They think that some normative beliefs can be justified sufficiently even though they cannot be validly inferred from from other beliefs. And what this idea comes to, at least in the hands of its foremost proponents in the current literature, is the thought that some normative beliefs are self-evident, by which they mean that properly understanding these beliefs can be sufficient for justifying a thinker in believing them, even in the absence of inferential support from other beliefs.

Even as intuitionist views have been gaining adherents among moral epistemologists, some detractors have sought to undermine them by citing results from empirical psychology. These results are supposed to undermine any confidence in the self-evidence of beliefs supported by intuition. The strategy is (at least in part) to undermine our confidence in the reliability of any capacity to form justified beliefs on the basis of intuition, and hence to suggest that intuition

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[2]The formulation is simplified from Sinnott-Armstrong's, so this is not quite a quotation, though several of the premises are verbatim transcriptions of his. See Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) pp. 74-77 for his somewhat longer version. I think that the simplification doesn't effect either the main point of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument or the appropriateness of my suggested response to it, though it does make the overall argument easier to follow.

cannot provide the kind of regress stoppers that non-skeptics would need to avoid arguments of

the sort exemplified above. Once again, one of the main proponents is Walter Sinnott-

Armstrong:

Unreliable:

(U1) If our moral intuitions are formed in circumstances where they are unreliable, and
we ought to know this, then our moral intuitions are not justified without inferential
confirmation.

(U2) If moral intuitions are subject to framing effects then they are not reliable in many
circumstances.

(U3) Moral intuitions are subject to framing effects in many circumstances.

(U4) We ought to know this.

(U5) Therefore our moral intuitions in those circumstances are not justified without
inferential confirmation.[3]

Sinnott-Armstrong lends support to steps (3) and (4) by citing various psychological

experiments involving subjects responses to questions about what to do in various hypothetical

scenarios. Among other things they show that people's answers can be influenced by how a case

is described to them. One line of argument uses Kahneman and Tversky's famous Asian disease

experiment to suggest the hypothesis that people's differential willingness to avoid killing as

opposed to letting die could be explained by framing effects.[4] Another cites studies which show

that people shift their responses to cases when the description of the very same case uses saving

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[3]Sinnott-Armstrong (2008) p. 52.

[4]Sinnott-Armstrong continues in the tradition of Tamara Horowitz (1998) who used
Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theoretic explanation of choices to attack arguments
from cases in support of a doing/allowing distinction. I wrote a response to that attempt (van
Roojen, 1999) as did Frances Kamm (1998). While I still agree with most of what I wrote, I'm
writing this paper to try to get closer to the core issue than I now think I did there.

language rather than language that talks of resulting deaths. Insofar as the mere description of a case must be irrelevant to how one ought to act in that case, these cases show that the subjects responses are influenced by framing.

I'm not going to deny that in these cases the responses were affected by framing. Nor am I going to deny the conclusion of the last argument suitably understood. Furthermore, I'm prepared to concede that the second argument (Unreliable) works against most current versions of intuitionism. But, I am going to argue, this is because both those intuitionists and Sinnott-Armstrong share an assumption which has artificially restricted the options for intuitionism. Put simply, that assumption is that every regress-stopper must itself have non-inferential justification sufficient for justified belief. My thesis will be that intuitionists should avail themselves of the resources that their common assumptions lead them to ignore if they want to resist challenges of the sort erected by Sinnott-Armstrong and his allies.

How The Options Have Been Artificially Restricted

You can see one way that the options are restricted by noticing the argument assumes that all relational justification depends on inference from another belief or on an ability to infer one belief from another. Thus, in a related context, Sinnott-Armstrong, suggests that the weakest version of intuitionism able to stop a regress must claim:

> . . . [S]ome 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. (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 341)

This claim is actually both too weak and too strong for minimal sufficiency. It is too weak to stop a regress if the non-inferential justification is still relational, for example if it requires relations of coherence to other beliefs, where that coherence doesn't amount to a relation of inferential support. That's because so long as the justification requires relation to another belief

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it will also seem plausible that this belief must be justified sufficiently to be believed. And then we're off to the races with our regress.

But the view is also to strong – it requires too much of regress stoppers. Whenever a theory says that there are no non-relational justifiers, regresses threaten. But there is room for a view which allows non-relational justification on its own insufficient for belief. This justification can then combine with relational modes of justification to generate justification sufficient for belief. This will be a form of foundationalism insofar as certain hypotheses come in with some justification – justification that eventually supports full belief in these hypotheses and also in others that are appropriately related to them. But it won't be aptly characterized as a view on which relational justification is always inferential, since (at least to my ear) inference starts with what we already believe and this kind of view lets coherence generate justification even when the hypotheses that cohere with one another are not fully justified.

Though views like this are not currently popular, and though I've been able to find no one in the ethics literature who seems to hold it, it is not entirely unfamiliar. Bertrand Russell at one time advanced such a view for epistemology in general. After contrasting versions of foundationalism and coherentist accounts of epistemology and rejecting a pure coherence view he writes:

> . . . But in a modified form the coherence theory can be accepted. In this modified form it will say that all, or nearly all, of what passes for knowledge is in a greater or lesser degree uncertain; that principles of inference are among the prima-facie materials of knowledge, then one piece of prima-facie knowledge may be inferible from another, and thus acquire more credibility than it had on its own account. It may thus happen that a body of propositions, each of which has only a moderate degree of credibility on its own account, may collectively have a very high degree credibility. But this argument depends on the possibility of varying degrees of intrinsic credibility, and is therefore not a *pure* coherence

theory. . . (Russell, 1948. p. 157)[5]

My suggestion is that a view of this sort, which allows moral intuition to generate moral

propositions with a certain degree of credibility short of that sufficient to justify belief will

enable intuitionists to stop regresses and to resist Sinnott-Armstrong's argument. And it also has

a good bit going for it when we look at the role that the best candidates for intuitive moral

judgements play in our thinking.

Paradigm Moral Intuitions Are Not Beliefs Nor Are They Sufficient to Justify Beliefs

Sinnott-Armstrong is not being unfair to his real life targets when he constricts the range

of options in this way. Each of the most prominent current moral intuitionists accept the claim

that is the main target of *Unreliable*. Robert Audi, Roger Crisp, Mike Huemer, Russ Shafer-

Landau, and Philip Stratton-Lake all defend views according to which unaided intuition yields

justification sufficient for knowledge.[6] All allow that the justification provided by intuition can

be defeated, but absent such defeaters intuition justifies beliefs and when belief results those

resulting beliefs count as knowledge. It is that claim which Sinnott-Armstrong effectively

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[5]In his (1985), Bonjour distinguishes moderate foundationalism – the view that
foundational beliefs must be prima facie though perhaps defeasibly justified - from weak
foundationalism – roughly the view I'm advocating here, before dismissing the latter. He credits
weak foundationalism to Russell, followed by Goodman (1954), Firth (1964) and Scheffler
(1967, ch. 5). As I read them only Russell clearly defends a specifically weak foundationalist
view. The others note the view in the course of arguing for a views of a sort that include both
moderate and weak foundationalism. I know of no current advocates but I'm not an
epistemologist.

[6] Audi's view is very strong, ". . . one does not have an intuition with that proposition as
its content until one believes it." (1996, p. 110) Crisp, in defending a view he attributes to
Sidgwick, concurs. (2002, pp. 64 &72n)   Huemer requires only that the justification be
sufficient for belief absent defeating evidence. (2005, p. 105) Shafer-Landau equates
intuitionism with the view that there are noninferentially justified moral beliefs. (2008, p. 83)
Stratton-Lake follows Audi in thinking that unsupplemented intuition generates knowledge.
(2002, p. 18)

targets.

Given that consensus view, it is actually surprising to look at the experiments that are supposed to make us doubt the reliability of intuition, since the phenomena they study are not clearly non-inferential beliefs. Sometimes there is no evidence to indicate that the responses weren't arrived at through inference. More importantly for my purposes, there is often little evidence to indicate that the responses were indicators of belief in the appropriate content. In the Kahneman and Tversky Asian Disease experiment, respondents were asked to choose between options for what to do. And while it is plausible that their overall beliefs played a role in their choices, there's no special reason to think that they believed they were doing the right thing as opposed to (for example) believed that their choice was most likely to be right.[7] In the Petrinovich and O'Neill study using trolley cases (heavily relied upon by Sinnott-Armstrong) respondents were offered six options for reacting to a claim from strongly agree to strongly disagree (with no option for don't know). Given that format there's no reason to think that they were expressing belief in the target claim when they answered with any of the non-extreme responses. Somewhat agree does not mean believe.

Reflection on our own responses to the sorts of hypotheticals that inform moral theorizing should, I think, reinforce the conclusion. My reactions to many trolley cases are somewhat tentative, though now that I've had a chance to reflect on them and put them together with other things I think I have a greater degree of confidence in some of my judgements. At this point they are no longer free of support from other plausible hypotheses and their justification is not purely on the basis of considering the cases in isolation.

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[7]Sinnott-Armstrong himself notes that views about the subjects moral beliefs have to be inferred from their choices in this experiment.

The experimenters were not being arbitrary when they chose to study attitude formation of a sort that did not conform to philosophical consensus about appropriate intuitionist starting points. One of the best candidates for a non-relational input into moral thinking and theorizing is the spontaneous judgements we reach about novel situations of choice of a sort we have not considered before. Often a moral principle that looked attractive on first consideration seems to us less so in light of our judgements about such cases that conflict with the principle. And this often effects our reasoning from there on.[8] Conflicting moral principles can each find support from other conflicting principles and cases that fit with them, as suggested by the regress argument with which we started. If we want to avoid regresses and break ties between equally coherent sets of views we need to privilege some judgements about matters over which such principles come into conflict. Well-chosen hypothetical choice scenarios provide us with one domain where we might find such judgements so long as some are in fact more plausible than others, whether that initial plausibility is sufficient judgement to believe them, or merely to take them seriously as working hypotheses.

We should conclude that the experimenters were looking at the right phenomena if they wanted to study a good candidate for intuitive justification in the moral realm. And if they were, this candidate does not fit with the consensus view among current intuitionists and their critics. That's because these candidates generate credences that fall short of belief. And, I think we

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[8]Of course, judgements about the plausibility of principles might well be another place where intuition plays a role, and also judgements about similarity of cases. Russell in fact seemed to regard judgements about which principles of reasoning are plausible to be paradigm case of the contents that carry some intrinsic credibility. And I think that we only have the materials to use intuitions about particular cases in a process of reaching reflective equilibrium if we have other judgements at more general levels that get the same sort of initial credence from non-relational sources.

should take the credence we give to these judgements at face value. By this I mean we should take ourselves to grant them a credence short of full belief because they do not provide sufficient warrant for belief. One good reason to entertain a judgment as plausible without believing in it is precisely that one has some reason but not conclusive reason to believe it given its plausibility. Our reactions might just be the reactions that are warranted given our epistemic position. And furthermore the liability to framing effects discovered by the researchers just shows that people's confidence in these judgements is weak enough that it can be shifted even by in the end irrelevant factors.

How This Helps

It should be relatively obvious where I'm going with this as an answer to Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge. An intuitionist of the sort I'm describing does not need to deny the conclusion of *Unreliable*. That is they can accept the claim that full on beliefs need justification from relational sources such as coherence in even if they also are supported by intuition. This sort of intuitionist also has the means to resist *Regress*. Since the view on offer allows coherence among a set of judgements none of which are fully justified purely on other grounds to raise the justification of each to believability, it would be misleading to count any of them as *inferred* from any other *belief*, thus denying (R1). And she'll deny (R4) as intended by proponents, precisely because she thinks we can get relational justification from other judgements that aren't beliefs and which are not justified sufficiently to believe.[9] But that denial won't lead to a

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[9]Because the argument assumes that all relational justification (justification from coherence) is inferential, it is tricky to say that such an intuitionist must reject (R4). In some sense she could accept (R4) just because she rejects the idea that the right way to characterize support from coherence as inferential. The important point really is that if we fix the argument so as to clearly include all manner of relational support of the kind coherence theorists rely on, my favored intuitionist will deny (R4) as modified.

regress because we can still require justification to depend on the conclusions accepted standing in the right relation of coherence to judgements which get an initial credence in a non-relational way. Judgements which have that status can stop regresses insofar as that status doesn't depend on anything distinct from themselves. Finally, the theory avoids the other well-known problem for pure coherence views – that they have no way to decide between two equally coherent but conflicting theories

There may still be a worry. This is that given the kind of undermining evidence Sinnott-Armstrong brings to bear, we should be sufficiently worried about the unreliability of our intuitive reactions to cases that they don't provide support enough even for this weak intuitionist regress stopper. It is certainly epistemically possible that it could come to that. But that would take more than the research so far has shown and perhaps more than it is likely to show.

It is an interesting question how we should think of the reliability of a belief forming process and what sorts of unreliability impugn a process. If a process is supposed to be sufficient to justify belief on its own without the aid of other sources of justification then evidence that it goes wrong in a relatively small number of cases is more troubling, than if it is only supposed to be one method among others. More so yet if the method must be used in a number of instances and only relied upon when the overall package hangs together, at least in light of correction from reflection, reasoning, and the inputs from other judgements generating plausible candidate principles. A less reliable process can be part of a more reliable overall process, and the total process might be less reliable overall if it lacked the only somewhat reliable sub-part. Condorcet's theorem gives us a simple model; voting in a population each member of which is only slightly better than chance at drawing the right conclusions turns out to more reliably get things right than the decisions of any individual. That example is over-simple

for a number of reasons, but it does show that the suggestion that repeated use of an only somewhat reliable process can generate a more reliable process. Of course moral enquiry is more complicated than voting for or against a proposition on a ballot. But the complication doesn't effect the parallel point in that domain. An only somewhat reliable intuitive judgement generating process can be part of an overall process of reaching reflective equilibrium about a subject matter that is more reliable as a result of incorporating it. What really needs to be shown to undermine the practice of relying on intuition is that the overall package is unreliable or that the resulting procedure would be more reliable if it jettisoned reliance on the intuitions entirely.

What would such an argument rely on? Presumably other judgements we find plausible or which are justified by a process that relies on such judgements. Take the Asian Disease experiment where we rightly conclude that the reactions of respondents are unreliable. We know something has gone wrong because it is highly plausible that the description of a decision situation is irrelevant to how a decision in that situation should turn out. That's why we regard our initial divergent judgements in such cases as unreliable. But at this point we don't have a reason to think that the total process of trying to reach reflective equilibrium among initially plausible starting points is unreliable. Rather we have reason to think that the process as a whole allows for self-correction. Perhaps we will find another reason to worry about the results of these processes combined. But if we reason well we will revise again in light of new information.

An Objections From The Fans of Intuition and a Reply

I speculate that the absence of this sort of view from the debate is to be explained partly sociologically. Recent epistemic views have been widely influenced by the suggestion that

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evidence is knowledge[10] and at least on a standard interpretation this would rule out foundational

justification that falls short of belief. But there is at least one other sort of consideration that

seems to count against the view. Versions of it have been articulated by Sellars, Davidson,

McDowell and others, and a related idea finds a home in Huemer's version of intuitionism.

Using the Sellarsian metaphor, the idea is that for intuition to provide evidence it must

generate inputs that are already within the space of reasons. This is taken to mean, on the one

hand that they must involve propositional attitudes, and on the other that the contents of those

propositional attitudes must be of a sort to bear the appropriate relations to the conclusions they

are used to support. McDowell attributes the view to Davidson in his treatment of experience:

> . . .[I]f we conceive of experience in terms of impacts on sensibility that occur
> outside the space of concepts, we must not think we can appeal to experience to
> justify judgements or beliefs . . . The space of reasons does not extend further
> than the space of concepts . . .

> But Davidson thinks experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on
> sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons.
> According to Davidson, experience is causally relevant to a subject's beliefs and
> judgements, but it has no bearing on their status as justified or warranted.
> Davidson says that, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except
> another belief" (p. 310), and he means in particular that experience cannot count
> as a reason for holding a belief.[11]

It's no surprise to find the objection articulated in a perceptual context since perception is often

used analogically to explain intuition in a moral context.

Mike Huemer's endorsement of direct realism as part of his intuitionism is one way to

avoid the position Davidson winds up in. Huemer suggests that it is a mistake to take perception

or intuition as providing evidence from which we infer conclusions about the world.

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[10] For instance, Williamson (2000).

[11]McDowell (1994) at page 14, quoting Davidson (186).

> . . . [T]he flaw consists in a basic misunderstanding of the structure of a
> foundationalist theory of knowledge. Intuitionism does not hold that from 'I have
> an intuition that p' one may infer 'p'; nor does the principle of Phenomenal
> Conservatism hold that 'It seems to met that p' is a reason for 'p'. Those would
> be claims about *inferential* justification. Phenomenal Conservatism and my
> version of intuitionism are versions of *foundationalism*: they hold that we are
> justified in some beliefs without the need for supporting evidence. The role of
> conditions (1), (3) and (5) [about intuition, experience and memory] in the theory
> of justification is that of conditions under which certain beliefs . . . , rather than
> that of evidence supporting those beliefs. (Huemer, 2005, pp. 120-121)

And Huemer takes the direct realist maneuver – predicated on the thought that perception or intuition provide their objects directly to be used in forming further conclusions – to require these objects to be beliefs which we are now fully justified in believing – provided that they have been presented by perception or intuition. That we perceive or intuit them is a precondition for their being justified, but it is not itself a justification. And this avoids the sort of problem that Davidson only avoids by denying any foundation at all, since the deliverances of perception and intuition are propositional and of the right sort to serve as justifications for further thoughts.

I think there is something right in this and something wrong in this. When we sort out various components of the proposal we can get the benefits of transparency without going all the way to requiring that the inputs be believed or that belief be warranted. What's right here is to think that the psychological claim, 'That it seems to me that p,' is not evidence but rather a precondition for the proposition that p to be evidence. And further Huemer is right to think that what intuition provides is a proposition – that p. What's wrong is to think we can only get those two benefits at the cost of thinking that we must believe p for the proposition that p to be an input to justification. But, at least as far as this argument goes, we need think no such thing. What matters to the ability of our intuitive judgements to rationalize further judgements is for their content to have implications for the contents of these further judgements. The problem, as

Huemer noted, was that a psychological claim about how things seem to me, doesn't carry any commitment incompatible with things being some other way. So a judgement with that psychological content can't put rational pressure on these further judgements, at least absent bridge premises we may not be in a position to accept. This argument thus constrains *the content* of the judgements contributed by intuition. It does not, however, constrain our confidence in them nor does it constrain the level of warrant for that confidence.

My suggestion then is to allow judgements with the relevant content into our thinking to justify beliefs even when the judgements are not full beliefs. We can characterize such judgements as accepting p with a certain credence; in ordinary language we might call if "finding p plausible". Huemer's argument doesn't show that there is anything wrong with this way of talking. It does show we should not take *the epistemically relevant content* of that attitude to be 'p is plausible'. Rather we should recognize that the epistemically relevant content is 'p'. But we can accept that short of requiring the relevant state of mind to be belief, and short of requiring that we have justification sufficient to believe that content. The main point is that someone who justifiably finds p plausible stands in an epistemically interesting relationship to the proposition p and that that proposition is the right kind of thing to be an epistemic reason to conclude yet further things, at least if it is true. It is the content of the state, and not our degree of confidence in that content, that is epistemically relevant to further conclusions and which makes other propositions epistemically relevant to it.[12] At the same time an intuitionist should say, it is standing in the right sort of relation to that proposition – considering it in the right way for it to show its plausibility – which allows it to play an appropriate epistemic role. This claim

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[12]Schroeder (2008) has some interesting discussion about how to think about this sort of thing, especially at the end of that paper.

is analogous to Huemer's claim about the role believing an intuitive judgement. The main

difference is that the present view allows the state to play its epistemic role with less by way of

justification.[13]

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[13]For what it is worth, this last section of the paper is the one I'm least sure of. I think it could probably be denied while defending the main point.

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