

Moral Intuitions and Skysight

I will follow George Bealer in his understanding of what a philosophic intuition is. According to Bealer, a philosophic intuition is an intellectual seeming which is comparable to, but different from, an empirical seeming. When I consider the following propositions, they just seem true: (1) no object can be red and green all over at the same time, (2) you don't know that there are sheep in the field when you see poodles in the field bred and clipped to look just like sheep, even if there are sheep in the field but out of sight behind some boulders, and (3) knowledge requires true belief. It also seems true that a house undermined will fall (to use one of Bealer's examples), but that is what Bealer calls a physical intuition because it is based on past observations of what happens when support is removed from beneath an object. It seems true that I exist but that, too, is based on my having current experiences of which I am aware, not simply on the basis of understanding the proposition "I exist" or being unable to think of circumstances where it would be false.

Moral intuitions are a subclass of philosophic intuitions. The intuition that it is obligatory to save the five in Triage and let one die, but wrong in Transplant to take the vital organs from one healthy person to save five, are philosophic intuitions whose objects are moral propositions.

There are different arguments that reach opposite conclusions about the evidential force of moral intuitions. An argument that concludes that moral intuitions can, by themselves, provide evidence for and against moral theories goes as follows:

1. If epistemic intuitions about knowledge and justification can, by themselves, provide evidence for and against epistemic theories, then moral intuitions can, by themselves, provide evidence for

and against moral theories.

2. Epistemic intuitions can, by themselves, provide evidence for and against epistemic theories.

3. Therefore, moral intuitions can, by themselves, provide evidence for and against moral theories.

Support for premise 2 comes from Gettier examples and anti-externalist examples like BonJour's example of Norman who is a reliable clairvoyant but has no reason to believe that he is. Isn't it intuitively obvious that the person who sees the poodles in the pasture does not know that there are sheep in the field? Isn't it intuitively obvious that Norman does not know, and is not justified in believing, that the President is in New York when his belief is based on his first clairvoyant experience, even if the President really is in New York? It seems that the Gettier case of the poodles shows that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge and that the Norman case shows that reliability is not sufficient for either knowledge or justified belief. Epistemic intuitions appear to be evidence against certain epistemic theories. They also appear to be evidence for other epistemic theories insofar as those theories can explain why the relevant intuitive judgments are true.

Of course, there has been a great deal of discussion of the evidential force of philosophic intuitions, and of epistemic intuitions in particular. Investigators have found that students from different cultures and different socio-economic backgrounds have different intuitions about standard examples in epistemology. One might try to dismiss these differences by comparing them to differences among students on how to punctuate a paragraph. It's plausible to maintain that we should be consulting the grammarians, not the students, when it comes to questions of punctuation. Similarly, we should be consulting the philosophers, not the students, on the epistemological cases the psychologists present to students. The trouble is not all the philosophers agree on these cases

either. Some think that Bonjour's Norman example defeats pure externalism about knowledge and justification, but not everyone. Many philosophers have the intuition that the person who sees a real barn on a road populated by barn facades does not know that he is looking at a barn, but William Lycan thinks the person does know. And similar remarks can be made about Lehrer's Truetemp and Dretske's zebra examples.

Further, philosophers like Hilary Kornblith think that we should be investigating what knowledge is in the way that scientists have investigated what an acid and atoms are. They maintain that appeal to our intuitions will only give us an account of our folk concepts of whatever it is that we are investigating, say, knowledge, justification, or right and wrong. Further, while I might discover what MY conception of knowledge is by consulting my epistemic intuitions, we will be able to discover what THE FOLK concept of knowledge is only by engaging in empirical investigations to see if most people's conceptions of knowledge are the same, or at least similar.

I have tried to respond to these objections elsewhere (see my entry on *a priori* justification and knowledge in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Suffice it to say here that I think that epistemologists are not trying to discover what the folk concept of knowledge is. So they do not have to engage in social science research to discover it. Rather, they are trying to determine what they, and others, SHOULD mean by "knowledge," and they do this by presenting examples to evoke intuitions, arguments for their own views, and objections to rival views. While social scientists might adopt a technical meaning for "knows," or "is justified in believing," (say, some reliabilist account), the question will still arise as to whether science *is justified in believing* that those are the best accounts of those notions from the standpoint of science. And that sense of justified belief, and knowledge, will be the sense that philosophers are interested in, and are trying

to determine, with the help of their epistemic intuitions.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has a different sort of criticism of the evidential force of epistemic intuitions which he also applies to moral intuitions. His criticism relies on two distinctions between: (a) personal and impersonal justification and (b) extreme and modest justification. A person is personally justified in believing something insofar as she is justified relative to the information that is available to her; impersonally justified insofar as she would be justified if she had full and accurate information (p. 72). A person is *wholly* justified if, and only if, she is both personally and impersonally justified. For Sinnott-Armstrong, a person is justified only relative to some contrast class. I might be justified in believing that some bird is a crow relative to the contrast class consisting of robins and swans, because I can distinguish crows from those birds, but not relative to the contrast class if ravens are included, because I can't tell a crow from a raven. A person is modestly justified if he is justified "given our everyday assumptions" (p. 219; cp., p. 89), that is relative to what we normally consider relevant alternatives or contrast classes; extremely justified if he is justified relative to all contrast classes including skeptical ones (pp. 89-91, 109-11).

Sinnott-Armstrong considers a Gettier case in which a woman named Bethany believes truly that it is 8:00 o'clock because the clock she is looking at says it is and she does not realize that it is broken. He leaves questions of knowledge aside and claims that Bethany is *personally* justified in believing that it is 8:00 because "her grounds are adequate from her personal perspective" (p. 73) (she is not being epistemically irresponsible in believing that it is 8:00, p. 73), but she is not *impersonally* justified in believing that it is 8:00 because her grounds "are not adequate from a fully informed perspective" (p. 73). I assume that he would say that she is personally *and*

modestly, *but not extremely*, justified in believing that it is 8:00 because she cannot not rule out the skeptical hypothesis that says that she is dreaming, or in *The Matrix*, and there is no real clock before her.

Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to state that he will call "a (moral or non-moral) belief justified only when it is wholly justified, unless I otherwise indicate" (p. 73). He will argue that no moral belief is *extremely* justified *on the basis of a moral intuition*. To be so justified on that basis, a moral intuition alone would have to be capable of ruling out what he calls moral nihilism, the view that, "Nothing is morally wrong, required, good, bad, etc." (p. 79). Moral nihilism is the analogue of skepticism about the existence of the external world.

Sinnott-Armstrong's claim that we cannot be extremely justified in believing that nihilism is false, based solely on intuitions, seems false, for aren't we justified in believing solely on the basis of moral intuitions that (a) "it is morally wrong to torture babies just for fun" (p. 200), (b) "morally wrong [for you] to push a fat man in front of a trolley when this won't save any lives just because you are angry with him for beating you in a game" (p. 210), and (c) "morally wrong to rape violently just to relieve sexual tension or to express dominance" (p. 217)? Insofar as we are justified in believing (a), (b), or (c) solely on the basis of moral intuitions, we are justified on that basis in believing that moral nihilism is false, that is in believing that *some* things are wrong, period.

We have to be careful here to be clear about what Sinnott-Armstrong is denying. His official view is that *in circumstances where I am aware that moral intuitions are unreliable (in part, because I am aware that the moral intuitions of different people genuinely conflict)*, I cannot be impersonally justified in believing any of (a)-(c) solely on the basis of the relevant moral

intuitions. He compares this situation to one where I randomly pick out one thermometer from a group of thermometers, knowing that many of them are inaccurate (p. 201). In that case I can't be justified in believing that the water into which I stick the thermometer is really the temperature it reads. (He also compares it to a barn facade case where the person knows, or should know, that there are lots of barn facades on the road on which he is traveling, p. 210).

But couldn't I be *impersonally* justified in believing that the temperature is what this thermometer reads? Suppose some of the thermometers are blue and others red. Suppose full and accurate information, which I do not possess, indicates that the red thermometers are accurate, and I see that the thermometer I've chosen is red. In those conditions of full and accurate information, I would be personally justified in believing that the water is the temperature that the thermometer reads. So even now I am *impersonally*, though not personally, justified in believing the water temperature is what the thermometer says. Of course, from that it follows that I am not now *wholly* justified in believing what I do since that requires being *both* impersonally *and* personally justified in my belief.

Something similar applies to the sort of justification certain moral intuitions might provide. Suppose full and accurate information includes the fact that, solely on the basis of moral intuitions, nearly everyone agrees with the moral judgments expressed in (a)-(c). Sinnott-Armstrong allows that, "If we know that everyone agrees with...[some] particular moral belief, then we might have reason to trust it" (p. 202). So even for him it is possible that I would be personally justified in believing (a)-(c) solely on the basis of moral intuitions given full and accurate information. In those circumstances my knowledge that everyone agrees that (a)-(c) are true would not be part of my justification for believing (a)-(c). That knowledge would only serve as an undercutting defeater

for defeaters of my justification for believing (a)-(c), that is, defeaters based on evidence regarding the unreliability of moral intuitions. So, contrary to what he says (p. 214), even Sinnott-Armstrong must admit that I can now be *impersonally*, even if not personally, justified in believing (a)-(c) solely on the basis of my intuitions because it might now be true that I *would be* personally justified given full and accurate information, information that includes widespread agreement on (a)-(c).

What Sinnott-Armstrong should maintain is that most educated adults (pp. 214-15) now have reason to believe that moral intuitions are not reliable (he gives five reasons for thinking this, pp. 195-210), and that *in these circumstances* they are not *personally* justified in believing (a)-(c) *solely* on the basis of moral intuitions, because their grounds are not adequate given the *totality of information* now available to them. It is not clear that educated people do have reason to believe that all moral intuitions are unreliable. Even Sinnott-Armstrong agrees that doubts about justification in (b), the case involving pushing the fat man in front of the trolley out of anger alone, cannot be founded on what he calls illusion (p. 210), but he thinks they may be founded on partiality and emotion. But I do not see how partiality would enter in. How could my self-interest be affected by my judgments on these cases or by the judgments of others? It's not likely that any of us will find ourselves in similar situations. Insofar as this is true, and the examples are hypothetical, there is no reason to think that our emotions skew our judgments.

Maybe we have evidence that the blue thermometers are inaccurate; but by itself this would not make it reasonable to believe that the red ones are. Something similar holds when it comes to certain moral intuitions as compared to others. Maybe we have reason to believe that some moral intuitions are unreliable, but that does not make it reasonable to believe that the moral intuitions

regarding (a)-(c) are. And even if the moral intuitions we can rely on are too few in number to base a moral *theory* upon, they are enough to refute moral nihilism.

Sinnott-Armstrong has another argument against the evidential force of moral intuitions in the absence of what he calls confirming evidence (although sometimes undercutting defeaters could perform the needed role Sinnott-Armstrong seeks without providing confirmation). He argues that there is always an evolutionary argument to explain why it seems obvious that acts like those described in (a)-(c) are wrong that is at least as good as the explanation that says they seem obviously true because they ARE true. His actual argument seems to be:

(4) "When both of two hypotheses predict an observation, that observation cannot be used as evidence for one as opposed to the other" (p. 191).

(5) It appears obvious that "(T): It is morally wrong to torture children just for fun" (p. 191).

(6) The moral nihilist's hypothesis (H1) is that (T) appears obvious because "all moral beliefs are the result of evolutionary or cultural illusions" (p. 191).

(7) The moral intuitionist's hypothesis (H2) is that (T) appears obvious because it is true and moral intuition grasps certain moral truths like (T).

(8) Therefore, that (T) appears obvious is not evidence for either (H1) or (H2).

(9) So the fact that (T) appears obvious cannot be used to refute (H1), nor to refute moral nihilism.

As given, the argument is unsound. (4) is false because two hypotheses might both predict equally well some observation and yet we should accept one and reject the other. If I see footprints in the sand, one hypothesis to explain this observation is that someone recently walked there. Another is that some pranksters bought some rubber feet at a novelty store, attached them to the ends of two long poles, rented a helicopter and had it fly over the beach, and then made the

footprints from the helicopter using the long poles with the rubber feet at their ends. Though each hypothesis explains the observation equally well, we should accept the first and reject the second. When it comes to justified belief, the conditional probability of each hypothesis on background evidence is relevant as well as the conditional probability of the observation on the hypothesis. (4) is flawed because it ignores the first conditional probability and considers only the second.

Perhaps it would be fair to revise Sinnott-Armstrong's argument in the following way:

(10) We are justified in believing P only if P is part of the best explanation of relevant appearances.

(11) The judgments of wrongness in (a)-(c) appear true.

(12) The best explanation of that appearance of truth is not that they are true and that their truth is grasped by intuition (an evolutionary or cultural explanation is at least as good).

(13) Therefore, we are not justified in believing the judgments of wrongness in (a)-(c) are true and their truth is grasped by intuition.

The first worry about this argument concerns whether (10) is self-defeating. What appearances does it explain? If none, then by its own lights we are not justified in accepting it. However, someone might claim that we are justified in believing (10) because it is the best explanation of certain epistemic intuitions. For instance, most people have the epistemic intuition that we are justified in believing that someone recently walked on the beach and not justified in believing the pranksters story. Why are we justified in believing that someone recently walked on the beach? Well, perhaps because (IBE) is true; (IBE) says that we are justified in believing H if, and only if, H is part of the best explanation of relevant observations, and in this case the best explanation of the footprints is that someone recently walked on the beach.

Many people think that if you have looked at mature and immature crows all over the

world, in different seasons, and they are all black, then you are justified in believing that all crows are black, and not justified in believing that crows are many colors, including black. Why? Because of (IBE). So why should we accept (IBE)? Because it best explains relevant epistemic intuitions in the footprints and crow cases, and in many others! Put aside the obvious objection about circularity involved in this justification of (IBE). Following Sinnott-Armstrong, we should ask why we should think that these epistemic intuitions provide evidence of anything. Consider (T*)= we are justified in believing on the basis of observing the footprints in the sand that someone recently walked there and not justified in believing the prankster story. Can't the epistemic nihilist offer a hypothesis parallel to the one Sinnott-Armstrong attributes to the moral nihilist, namely, (H*): (T*) appears obvious because all epistemic beliefs regarding justification are the result of evolutionary or cultural illusions? Thinking they were justified in believing that the saber tooth tiger was near on the basis of observing fresh footprints on soft ground might have been beneficial to our ancestors because they would then run, or have been especially vigilant, and they wouldn't have been otherwise. It might be in the interest of the powerful to get others to accept certain principles and views of justification on the basis of which their subjects are justified in believing that the powerful should hold power. So how can we trust our epistemic intuitions about justification given that they are equally likely on evolutionary and cultural hypotheses?!

But if we can't trust those intuitions, then we can't use them to justify (10). And if we are not justified in believing (10), we cannot be justified on the basis of the argument that includes it in accepting the conclusion that is meant to undermine the epistemic force of moral intuitionism. Unless there is a relevant difference between epistemic and moral intuitions, I do not see how the evidential force of moral intuitions can be called into question without calling into question the

evidential force of epistemic intuitions. But once their evidential force is called into question, I see no way of mounting an argument against the evidential force of moral intuitions.

I want to conclude with an analogy I call skysight. In Plato's cave, people are chained by their necks so they can only look at the wall of the cave in front of them and the shadows that are played on it. Imagine something similar. Imagine that people have been chained their whole lives so that they can look at the sky but nothing else around them. Imagine that they are kept alive by intelligent aliens who have come to earth in their UFOs and conquered us. Suppose at first people are not allowed to communicate with each other. They observe the sun, clouds, and birds during the day and the moon and stars at night. Gradually they form beliefs about these things. Even though they have no way to test their beliefs against their other senses (assume that the aliens do not allow rain to fall on them or for them to feel heat from the sun), I think that they could come to be justified in believing, say, that there are clouds and that which clouds appear when fall into regular patterns, in believing that there is a moon and that it goes through various phases, etc. To me, the visual observations of these people provide them evidence for and against what they believe about things and events in the sky. Further, if they do, then my philosophic intuitions can provide me evidence for and against philosophical theories, at least provided I do not know anything about the philosophic intuitions of others.

Suppose I learn that often the philosophic intuitions of others, especially other philosophers, differ from mine. How will that affect the evidential force of my intuitions? That situation is similar to what would happen if the sky-lookers were allowed to communicate with each other regarding what they think they see in the sky and discover that they sometimes disagree. Still, it would be possible for them to develop hypotheses to explain why some skysight observa-

tions were mistaken, say, because most of the people who reported seeing pink flamingos in the sky also report feeling a little woozy in their heads. Or it might be pointed out that a certain hypothesis about what someone has seen is incompatible with other observations he claims to have made. In philosophy, errors are often attributed to some subtle error in reasoning (say, founded on a subtle equivocation) or failure to consider other relevant cases (as, say, when Unger presents a multiple-trolley case to undercut the standard intuition in Transplant that says it is wrong to cut one person up to get his organs to save five).

So moral intuitions can have as much evidential force as the observations of skysight, and the fact that there is a great deal of disagreement in moral intuitions no more undercuts their force than disagreement in skysight observations undercuts theirs. Disagreement in skysight observations and in moral intuitions might be a defeater of their evidential force, but a good explanation of why some of those observations, or intuitions, are probably mistaken can serve as an undercutting defeater of the original defeater. Insofar as they are undercutting defeaters, they do not override the defeater based on disagreement and so do not confirm what the original observation, or intuition, supports. Instead, in the case of moral intuitions, the undercutting defeaters would restore the evidential force that the intuitions initially possessed. Hence, moral intuitions can by themselves provide evidence for, and against, general moral claims.

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