

## Can Intuitions Justify Moral Claims?

*¿Pueden las intuiciones justificar las afirmaciones morales?*

Alison M. Jaggar\* ; Theresa W. Tobin\*\*

\*University of Colorado at Boulder, United States  
Alison.jaggar@gmail.com

\*\*Marquette University, United States  
Theresa.tobin@marquette.edu

### Abstract

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, many analytic philosophers turned to addressing questions of practical ethics, radically expanding the field of moral philosophy beyond the meta-ethical topics that had been its primary focus for most of the century. Yet addressing practical controversies quickly raised the question of how normative moral claims might be justified. Many analytic philosophers relied on intuitionism, which has a long pedigree in Anglophone moral philosophy. This paper assesses three ways in which twentieth analytic philosophers drew on intuitions to support or dispute moral claims. We argue that those methods failed in their aim of promoting trustworthy moral knowledge because they relied on assumptions that, when presumed in contexts of structural epistemic injustice, are systematically misleading. Even though intuitions are among the sources of knowledge on which moral agents should rely, moral epistemology must give careful attention to the social processes through which intuitions and other forms of evidence are gathered, refined, and assessed. Producing trustworthy moral knowledge requires democratic reasoning processes that are sensitive to the ubiquity of epistemic injustice and domination and develops strategies for countering these.

**Keywords:** intuition, moral justification, moral epistemology, epistemic injustice.



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## Resumen

En las tres últimas décadas del siglo XX, muchos filósofos analíticos han abordado cuestiones de ética práctica, ampliando radicalmente el campo de la filosofía moral más allá de los temas metaéticos que habían sido su foco principal durante la mayor parte del siglo. Sin embargo, abordar este tipo de controversias prácticas rápidamente hizo surgir la cuestión de cómo justificar las afirmaciones morales normativas. Muchos filósofos analíticos se basaron en el intuicionismo, que tiene un linaje muy antiguo dentro de la filosofía moral anglófona. Este artículo evalúa tres formas en las que los filósofos analíticos del siglo XX recurrieron a las intuiciones para apoyar o rebatir las afirmaciones morales. Argumentamos que esos métodos fracasaron en su objetivo de promover un conocimiento moral digno de confianza porque se basaron en supuestos que, cuando se presumen en contextos de injusticia epistémica estructural, son sistemáticamente engañosos. A pesar de que las intuiciones se encuentran entre las fuentes de conocimiento en las que los agentes morales deben confiar, la epistemología moral debe prestar especial atención a los procesos sociales a través de los cuales se recogen, refinan y evalúan las intuiciones y otras formas de evidencia. Producir un conocimiento moral digno de confianza requiere procesos de razonamiento democráticos que sean sensibles a la omnipresencia de la injusticia epistémica y la dominación, así como desarrollar estrategias para contrarrestarlas.

**Palabras clave:** intuición, justificación moral, epistemología moral, injusticia epistémica.

### 1. What is moral intuitionism

Intuitionism is a methodological approach used extensively in analytic philosophy, including the areas of epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind.<sup>1</sup> The present paper discusses intuitionism in analytic moral philosophy. This is ethical or moral intuitionism but here we often call it simply intuitionism. Intuitionism is a long-established approach to the perennial question of how to justify moral claims and may still be the most widely used methodological approach in analytic moral epistemology.

Moral intuitionism takes intuitions to be the primary evidence for or against normative moral claims. Intuitions are the blocks from which moral knowledge is built. Intuitionism contrasts with approaches to moral methodology that treat principles as epistemically fundamental, such as utilitarianism or Kantianism. Structurally, intuitionism resembles empiricism, which is a broad epistemological approach that takes all knowledge to be derived from sense experience and then offers a variety of accounts of what sense experience consists in and how this derivation should be performed. Similarly, intuitionists offer varying conceptions of intuitions and how they are basic to moral knowledge.

The epistemological tasks facing moral intuitionists include explaining:

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<sup>1</sup> Cappelen (2012) denies that intuitions are widely used in philosophy but his view is controversial.



- What are moral intuitions or, more specifically, what do philosophers mean when they employ this familiar term in the context of moral philosophy?
- How do intuitions provide evidence for or against normative moral claims?
- If intuitions are incompatible with each other, by what methods can we determine which ones are epistemically reliable and which are not?
- Why does this method of selection tend to produce trustworthy moral knowledge?

Intuitionism can be caricatured as a crude subjectivist method of moral reasoning recommending that moral agents rely simply on their gut feelings, a method that would obviously undermine the whole project of reasoning about morality. Although the methods of a few intuitionist philosophers have occasionally appeared to veer close to this, most analytic philosophers have used methods for assessing the evidential value of intuitions that are less obviously subjectivist. This paper assesses three ways in which twentieth analytic philosophers drew on intuitions to support or dispute moral claims. We argue that those methods failed in their aim of promoting trustworthy moral knowledge because they relied on assumptions that are systematically misleading when they are presumed in contexts of structural epistemic injustice. Even though intuitions are among the sources of knowledge on which moral agents should rely, moral epistemology must give careful attention to the social processes through which intuitions and other forms of evidence are gathered, refined, and assessed. We conclude that intuitions are indispensable to trustworthy moral knowledge but that they play a helpful evidential role only when they are embedded in democratic reasoning processes that include strategies for counteracting epistemic injustice and domination.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the second section, following this introduction, we explain how contemporary analytic philosophers have used the term “intuition” when they invoke intuitions as evidence for normative moral claims. In the following section we identify three challenges facing those who take intuitions to be reliable sources of moral knowledge and in the fourth section we outline three strategies that analytic philosophers have used in selecting which intuitions are morally dependable. In the fifth section, we evaluate intuitionist epistemological strategies and explain why they are inadequate. In the sixth and final section, we address head-on the question of whether intuitions can justify moral claims. We conclude that intuitions are vital components of moral knowledge but that they can serve as evidence for moral knowledge only when they have been selected and refined by just methods.

## 2. What are moral intuitions?

“Intuition” is a fairly common term in ordinary English but it has acquired several semi-technical meanings in the writings of philosophers, who have used it in a variety of ways. One major fault line runs between those who regard moral intuitions as propositional and those who regard them as pre-reflective experiences, a difference linked with different accounts of the process and speed by which people access their intuitions. Earlier intuitionists, such



as W. D. Ross thought that moral intuitions were propositions to be ascertained through careful reflection, not unlike John Rawls's considered convictions (see Ross, 1930/2002, p. 14). More recently, intuitions have been regarded as immediate or pre-reflective experiences or seemings (Bealer, 1998; Chudnoff, 2013). Some philosophers working in experimental philosophy take moral intuitions to be snap judgments, fast, automatic or semi-automatic, and not always fully present to consciousness (Kahneman, 2012). On the second account, a Rawlsian considered conviction is not an intuition because it is deliberate rather than spontaneous.

Both accounts are compatible with regarding intuitions as infused with moral emotions such as guilt, shame, empathy, or anger. One much discussed example is spontaneous disgust at one-off, non-reproductive and so apparently harmless sexual relations between an adult brother and sister (Haidt, 2001). However, emotion is not necessarily restricted to intuitions taken as immediate responses. Reflective, considered convictions might also be imbued by emotions regarded not just as mere feelings but rather as complex evaluative orientations toward the world.

In this paper, we want to avoid a narrow or restrictive definition of "intuition," so we follow Williamson in using the term inclusively to mean "whatever contemporary philosophers have in mind when they talk about intuitions."

Although we could decide to restrict the term 'intuition' to states with some list of psychological or epistemological features, such a stipulation would not explain the more promiscuous role the term plays in the practice of philosophy. (Williamson, 2007, p. 218)

We concur with Stich and Tobia's assertion: "The one thing that all philosophers' uses of intuition seem to have in common is that those asserting intuitions "take (them) to be obvious" (Stich and Tobia, 2016, p. 6, emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> This suggests that many contemporary philosophers regard intuitions as nuggets of moral knowledge offering weighty evidence for or against normative claims.

### 3. Three challenges for moral intuitionism

What contribution do intuitions make to moral justification? How can they play an evidential role in confirming or disconfirming normative claims? Regardless of whether they take intuitions to be well-considered propositions, first thoughts, or involuntary emotional responses, moral intuitionists must explain why they take intuitions to be reliable sources of moral knowledge. In giving such an account, they face immediate challenges. Although most of these challenges have long been noticed, they have been brought into sharp focus

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<sup>2</sup> Stich and Tobia (2016, p. 7) states that people "find themselves almost immediately disposed to offer an answer, though they are not consciously aware of engaging in any reasoning that leads them to that answer".

by experimental philosophy or “x-phi,” a broad movement aiming to conduct empirical research that bears on philosophical questions.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this could mean a wide range of things but much x-phi takes the form of investigating people’s moral intuitions. The investigations usually have been done via questionnaires asking for people’s responses to imagined moral dilemmas. Some experimental philosophers have distributed questionnaires in their classrooms, while Harvard cognitive scientists have been able to gather data from tens of thousands of participants across the world by posting the Moral Test Sense on the internet (<https://www.moralsensetest.com/>).<sup>4</sup> A survey run by the BBC online received 65,000 respondents (Edmonds, 2014, p. 9).

Systematic empirical investigations have highlighted several problems for the project of deriving moral knowledge from intuitions. The most obvious problem is that people may lack clear or firm intuitions on some moral questions, especially when they concern novel situations such as those involving emotional relationships with robots. Yet even when people have intuitions about moral matters, there are reasons for questioning those intuitions’ epistemic reliability.

### 3.1 Incompatibilism among moral intuitions

One familiar problem for intuitionism is that people’s intuitions vary widely on multiple dimensions. Different people may have very different intuitive responses to the same situation, such as seeing a fish on a hook. And the same person may have intuitions that seem rationally inconsistent with each other, such as eating some mammalian species but not others (Norcross 2004). Or they may be disgusted by the thought of eating an individual animal with which they are personally acquainted even when they regularly eat other members of the species to which the individual belongs. Many philosophers claim that differences in moral responses occur systematically among members of different demographic groups in the same society. For instance, it has long been claimed that women tend to have different moral intuitions from men, especially on such issues as whether a crying child should be smothered to prevent its giving away the location of a group of people fleeing Nazis or whether someone should be thrown off an overcrowded lifeboat (Gilligan, 1981-1982; Buckwalter and Stich, 2014). There is some reason to believe that systematic differences in intuitions exist among demographic categories additional to gender, including age, personality, academic affiliation, and native language (Stich and Tobia 2016, p. 13). And individuals’ intuitions may change over time; for instance, formerly homophobic people often change their attitudes if they have a gay family member.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, John Stuart Mill advocated “experiments in living” (Mill, 1977, pp. 260-267). Others have noted that experimental philosophy was also foreshadowed by work on Native American ethics as Brandt (1954) and Ladd (1957).

<sup>4</sup> Accessed 7 October, 2022.



There also appear to be systematic cross-cultural variations in intuitions. Some cognitive scientists report that people who are demographically WEIRD (i.e. those who come from countries that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) have intuitions that, in a global context, are weird or anomalous (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). But societal intuitions also change over time. As Anderson notes, the past fifty years have seen dramatic changes in Euro-American views about the morality of LGBT sexuality, divorce, and premarital sex (Anderson, 2015, p. 27). Over the past one hundred and fifty years, Western views about slavery, honor killings, race and gender have changed radically. When intuitions vary so widely and when they are so susceptible to change, intuitionist moral epistemology must explain how to determine which intuitions, if any, are reliable guides to moral knowledge.

### **3.2 Even if intuitions were relatively uniform and fixed, it would still be necessary to explain why they were reliable sources of moral knowledge**

Some philosophers claim that differences among the moral intuitions of various demographic groups have been exaggerated and that any differences that may exist are less significant than striking convergences in the moral intuitions of people across the world (Adelberg, Thompson and Nahmias, 2014). Several explanations for convergence in people's intuitions have been proposed.

One frequent speculation is that apparent convergences in moral intuitions might have some biological basis. For instance, they might result from an "innate morality" to be explained in terms of biological evolution (Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2011, p. 123). The disgust many people feel at the thought of non-reproductive sex between siblings could have evolved as a block to incest. It is also possible that convergences in intuition could result from the fact that people in different groups are socialized similarly. For instance, cross-cultural similarities among the moral psychologies of women and men respectively might result from each sex having been socialized to perform similar sexual divisions of labor. If widely shared intuitions were found to reflect cross-cultural patterns of human socialization, they might indicate residual features of a universal human morality.

Yet, even if it were possible to find moral intuitions that held universally, they would not necessarily be nuggets of moral knowledge. Some philosophers who attribute shared intuitions to biological evolution, especially utilitarians, assert that such allegedly innate intuitions are sometimes morally misleading (Singer, 2005; Haidt, 2001). Similarly, intuitions that are socially conditioned might have provided good guidance for some past ways of life but no longer be appropriate in contemporary circumstances. Or the moral attitudes revealed in widely shared intuitions might provide good moral guidance for many situations of daily life but be inadequate for more extraordinary situations such as disasters, war, and systematic injustice. The general point is that, even if intuitions are widely shared, this fact alone does not mean that they are reliable guides to right action. Additional argument is required to



show that even intuitions that are almost universally shared provide good evidence for moral claims.

### 3.3 Apparent moral and epistemic arbitrariness

Possibly the most difficult challenge for moral intuitionists is the seemingly random relationships between many intuitions and factors relevant to their truth, a randomness that has been strikingly revealed by experimental philosophy. For instance, people's intuitions are often influenced by the order in which morally problematic cases are presented, the wording used to present those cases, and the degree of physical effort that would hypothetically be involved in sacrificing one person to save others, such as pushing someone off a bridge versus flipping the switch that will result in his death (Stich and Tobia, 2016). Contextual features of situations often seem to exert an influence on people's intuitions; for instance, their intuitions may change after watching different types of films. The fact that intuitions are regularly influenced by causal factors that bear no apparent relevance to their epistemic appropriateness casts doubt on their reliability as signposts to moral knowledge. In face of the seeming arbitrariness of many intuitions, how can philosophers identify which, if any, provide reliable moral guidance?

## 4. Three strategies for selecting veridical intuitions

In this section we outline three strategies that analytic philosophers have used in selecting morally dependable intuitions. The strategies rest on assumptions that are not always explicit and which we will discuss in the following section.

### 4.1 Appealing to self-evidence

One natural approach to selecting among moral intuitions is to assign most credence to those intuitions in which we have most confidence, just as Descartes gave epistemic primacy to ideas that he found clear and distinct. Sidgwick thought that clarity and distinctness were among the defining characteristics of self-evident intuitions and Moore appears to have thought the same. John Maynard Keynes strikingly describes Moore's dramatic response to people whose intuitions diverged from his

Victory was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility. Moore...was a great master of this method—greeting one's remarks with a gasp of incredulity—Do you really think that, an expression of face as if to hear such a thing said reduced him to a state of wonder verging on imbecility, with his mouth wide open and wagging his head in the negative so violently that his hair shook. "Oh!" he would say, goggling at you as if either you or he must be mad; and no reply was possible...." (Keynes, 1949,

pp. 85-88, quoted in Anderson, 1993, p. 121)

Another way of appealing to self-evidence is invoking common sense. Intuitions can seem especially obvious if they are taken to be manifestations of common sense that all right-minded people accept. Walker reports that Sidgwick believed there was a “morality of common sense” and that this commonsense was simply his “own morality as much as it is any man’s” (Walker, 2007, p. 41).

#### **4.2 Seeking consistency among intuitions via arguments from analogy, especially via thought experiments**

A second method for selecting reliable intuitions is to give more credence to those that are consistent with each other. Philosophers have typically assumed that consistency is a necessary condition for a set of moral beliefs to be reliable. This assumption is expressed in the principle of universalizability, which requires similar moral cases to receive similar moral assessments. Non-philosophers too tend to be uncomfortable with “cognitive dissonance” and to regard intuitions as more reliable if they fit well together.<sup>5</sup>

A common method of seeking consistency among moral intuitions is to “pump” them via arguments from analogy. Philosophers “pump” moral intuitions about uncertain cases by invoking comparisons with other situations that they take to be relevantly similar to the one in dispute. Analogies may be drawn from precedents, existing beliefs, or so-called thought experiments about imagined situations. Thought experiments are typically simple stories designed to highlight factors believed morally crucial to a particular problem while eliminating details believed to be irrelevant. Those who design the experiments aim to invent situations that are analogous to the problem at issue on what they take to be the relevant dimensions while eliminating factors believed to generate irrelevant detail or “white noise.”

The validity of moral principles is often tested by pumping intuitions. Putative counterexamples offer courses of action that appear to be mandated by a particular moral principle but which nevertheless seem intuitively wrong to many people. The principle that lying is never permissible is challenged by the intuition that we may—and perhaps must—lie to a murderer at the door who is seeking to kill someone hidden in one’s house. The principle that torture is never morally permissible is challenged by the intuition that we may torture a terrorist who knows where a ticking time bomb is hidden under a crowded stadium. For an intuitionist, a strong intuition is sufficient to discredit a moral principle or at least require its modification.

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<sup>5</sup> Both Sidgwick and Mill thought that intuitions were reliable only if they could be unified by a plausible moral principle, namely the Principle of Utility (Cited by Rawls, 1971, p. 42, fn. 22 and 1971, p. 51, n. 26). We do not classify these philosophers as intuitionists because intuitions are not among the items they regard as epistemically basic. Instead, they assess the reliability of intuitions according to their compatibility with a principle that they take to be more epistemically fundamental.



Intuition pumping is also used to illuminate morally problematic situations, posing thought experiments that are often bizarre. One example is Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous defence of the moral permissibility of abortion by asking us to imagine waking in a hospital bed to find ourselves plugged into the circulatory system of a famous violinist with a fatal kidney ailment. Currently our kidneys are extracting poisons from his blood as well as our own and the violinist will die if unplugged immediately. In nine months, however, the violinist will have recovered and can safely be unplugged. Thomson says that we can permissibly unplug ourselves from the violinist immediately, even though doing so will cause his death, because the right to life does not include the right to use another person's body. By analogy, she argues, we can abort a foetus we did not intend to conceive. Thomson attempts to buttress her argument by appealing to moral intuitions about scenarios in which people reproduce by means of "people seeds" that embed themselves in carpets (Thomson, 1971). Other thought experiments that became famous in twentieth century analytic moral philosophy include the unfortunate fat man who became stuck in the exit from a cave, leading the trapped potholers to wonder if he might be dynamited so that they could escape the waters rising in the cave (Foot, 1967) and Robert Nozick's Experience Machine, designed to induce exclusively pleasurable subjective experiences that had no connection with external realities (Nozick, 1989).

Trolley problems may be the best-known type of thought experiments. The first trolley problem is attributed to Philippa Foot, who designed it to discuss the relevance of the Doctrine of Double Effect to the question of when abortions are morally permissible (1967). The Doctrine of Double Effect distinguishes between intending and foreseeing and makes it possible to justify actions that are intended to do good overall but which also result in foreseeable harm that could be prevented if action were not taken. An example is the unavoidable killing of civilians in a just war, sometimes called "collateral damage." For such actions to be morally justified, the harms must be necessary to achieve the good end and not disproportionate to it. Those who defend abortion rights argue that killing the foetus is not the main aim of abortion, even though it foreseeably causes the foetus to die.

Trolley problems are not distinct in principle from other thought experiments but they are so vivid and have become so ubiquitous that working with them has come to be called trolleyology. Trolley problems are frequently used not only by moral philosophers but also by psychologists and cognitive scientists investigating moral thinking. The problems characteristically feature five innocent people bound to the track of a "trolley" (a tram or a train) and ask which if any circumstances might justify sacrificing one innocent person to save the five. The point of trolley problems is to sharpen intuitions about incompatibilities between utilitarianism and deontology. For consequentialists, it is always better to kill one in order to save five but different versions of the trolley problem have been designed to explore various deontological considerations that might make this the wrong answer. The considerations include several distinctions that deontologists think are morally significant, not only the distinction between intending and foreseeing, which is central to the Doctrine of

Double Effect, but also distinctions between positive and negative duties, doing and allowing, and acting and omitting to act.

### 4.3 Appealing to philosopher's moral expertise

One problem for those seeking agreement on intuitions is determining *whose* intuitions should count. Western moral philosophers have often made claims about “our” intuitions without specifying precisely who “we” are. Critics of this nonspecific use of language charge that it is overinclusive and disregards the intuitions of non-philosophers. Anderson points out that Moore’s intuitions about the good diverged considerably from those of many other people, who value such things as meaningful work, athletic achievement, justice, and freedom, and she attributes this divergence to the fact that Moore consulted the intuitions of only a small and unrepresentative group of people.

Moore and his followers removed themselves from active engagements in the larger world, withdrew to private spaces in the company of intimate friends, and introspectively contemplated the isolated objects of their imaginations. (Anderson, 1993, p. 120)

Many Western philosophers have been comfortable asserting explicitly that the moral thinking of educated people, particularly philosophers, is more reliable than that of the less educated. Aristotle thought that leisure was needed for rational reflection. Mill famously regarded “higher” pleasures as more morally weighty than lower ones. Sidgwick (1907/1962, pp. 489-90) argued that the calculations required by utilitarianism were too complex for most people, so that only the elite should be taught this “esoteric morality.” Rawls (1971, p. 50) aimed to characterize the sense of justice of “one (educated) person.”

For much of the twentieth century, analytic philosophers were reluctant to claim any special normative expertise. They focused primarily on meta-ethics and purported to investigate only the “logic and language” of moral and political philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Yet after about 1970 and stimulated by the civil unrest of the late 1960s, many analytic philosophers returned to addressing current normative controversies. New fields of so-called applied ethics were established including bioethics, business ethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics, and sexual ethics. Some philosophers began to reclaim moral expertise, arguing that their philosophical training had developed their proficiency in thinking about moral issues (Singer, 1972).

When philosophers have defended their moral expertise, they have not usually claimed explicitly that their moral intuitions are more reliable than those of the “folk.” Indeed, Singer thought that philosophers’ moral expertise was grounded precisely on their ability to distance

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<sup>6</sup> McCumber (2001) has argued that one reason for the emphasis on meta-ethics was to avoid being targeted as communist during the McCarthyist period that followed WWII.

from intuitions, which he thought could often be morally misleading.<sup>7</sup> The trustworthiness of philosophers' intuitions is more often an unstated assumption of intuitionist methodology rather than an explicit claim. Still, W. D. Ross asserted that "the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics, just as sense-perceptions are the data of natural science" (1930/2002, p. 41). Weinberg et al. (2010) cites S. D. Hales:

According to the expertise defense, "we should acknowledge that not all intuitions are created equal ... . For example, the physical intuitions of professional scientists are much more trustworthy than those of undergraduates or random persons in a bus station" (Hales, 2006, p. 171).

And Stich and Tobia (2016, p. 15) cite Horvath, who asks:

Why should professional philosophers grant...that their own intuitions about hypothetical cases vary equally with irrelevant factors as those of the folk? Surely no chess grandmaster, mathematician or physicist would grant anything remotely like that to an experimental psychologist. (Horvath, 2010).

## 5. Assessing intuitionist epistemological strategies

### 5.1 Appealing to self-evidence

Although moral intuitions tend to be subjectively experienced as compelling, subjective certainties are notoriously incapable of resolving interpersonal disputes because they so easily slide into dogmatism and deadlock. We have seen that intuitionism often takes the form of appeal to moral commonsense, that is, to what is taken to be "obvious" or self-evidently correct, but commonsense not only differs across cultures but also varies within societies, in part reflecting peoples' different life experience. As noted, Anderson points out that Moore's intuitions about the good diverge considerably from those of many other people in his society, who value such things as meaningful work, athletic achievement, justice, and freedom. Anderson attributes this divergence to the fact that Moore consulted the intuitions of only a small and unrepresentative group of people and did not ask the servants, for instance, what they thought. Anderson comments:

It is not surprising that many goods were not salient to people in such a privileged, exclusive aristocratic setting, insulated from the experiences of work and practical activity with strangers (Anderson, 1993, p. 120).

Consulting one's own intuitions is a methodological approach that is especially plausible to people with strong confidence in their own sense of right and wrong. Anderson (2014,

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<sup>7</sup> Singer (1972) claimed that philosophers' philosophical training made them "more than ordinarily competent in argument and in the detection of invalid inferences" and gave them "an understanding of moral concepts and of the logic of moral argument." In addition, philosophers have more time than most people to reflect deeply on moral issues.

p. 7) says that those who possess such confidence tend especially to be people from more privileged social classes. Imposter syndrome is disproportionately likely to be experienced by people from historically marginalized groups. Anderson quotes Dewey, who writes:

It is difficult for a person in a place of authoritative power to avoid supposing that what he wants is right as long as he has the power to enforce his demand. And even with the best will in the world, he is likely to be isolated from the real needs of others. (Dewey and Tufts, 1981, p. 226)

In real world practice, social power constrains people's moral perceptions. Anderson (2014, p. 8) asserts, "people are prone to confuse their own desires with the right in rough proportion to their power."

Academic philosophers in the United States tend to be drawn from more privileged social classes and the situation is similar in other Anglophone countries (Schwitzgebel et al., 2021). Because philosophers' intuitions may be influenced by their social position and may differ systematically from those of the general population, favoring intuitions that philosophers find self-evident carries both epistemic and moral risks. Philosophers' confidence in their own intuitions may well be misplaced and philosophers may well be oblivious to moral perceptions that are available to those less advantaged and more socially vulnerable. Susan Brison discusses how privileged male philosophers, entirely on the basis of their own intuition, imagined rape as "normal sexual activity minus consent." From the perspective of rape survivors, this is a false, insulting, and irresponsible understanding of sexualized violence (Brison, 2002, p. 7).

## 5.2 Seeking consistency via arguments from analogy

The method of arguing by analogy is familiar across the world. People everywhere use metaphors and parables, which are often helpful in moral discussion. They can illustrate moral claims, suggest novel perspectives, and persuade some audiences to reconsider their views. Nevertheless, the method of arguing from analogy has dangers.

Analogies always involve disanalogies. Some of the most striking analogies invented by philosophers are morally misleading because they omit context that is morally relevant. There are many ways in which being pregnant is not like being in a hospital bed with one's organs involuntarily hooked up to an adult stranger. Critics of intuition pumping say that philosophers who construct simplified analogies always already bias the case or beg the question via their prior decisions about which factors are relevant and which are not. Such philosophers might omit information that they think is morally irrelevant but which someone else might regard as crucial; for example, they might present a seeming dilemma that neglects other courses of action that are real possibilities.

Wisor (2011) argues that Peter Singer's famous "shallow pond" argument for saving the global poor is morally misleading because there are so many disanalogies between the situation of the global poor and the situation of a drowning child. Singer argues that, just as we have

an obligation to save a child from drowning in a shallow pond as long as we do not have to give up something of great moral significance, so we have an obligation to give money to the global poor if doing so will not cost us too much. Wisor points out that the shallow pond case omits the agency, context, institutions and complexity that characterize the situation of the global poor and argues that relying on this purported analogy has harmful implications for policies that can alleviate poverty. For example, Singer's analogy encourages us to promote aid over trade, to imagine that we are saviors, to believe we do not have to know much to save, to think that our actions can be apolitical, and to overlook the fact that helping the global poor requires making choices regarding the distribution of scarce resources. Wisor does not deny that arguments from analogy can sometimes be helpful for moral philosophers but he contends that thought experiments should avoid the oversimplification, reductionism, and abstraction that characterize what he calls shallow pond thinking.

In addition to the concerns that thought experiments are apt to mislead by oversimplification, we must remember that consistency alone cannot tell us which among our intuitions should be trusted and which should be disregarded. Paranoid individuals often tell stories that are internally consistent and so do members of religious and political cults. Even if internal consistency is a necessary condition for the reliability of moral intuitions, it cannot be sufficient. Additional evidence is required.

### 5.3 Arguments from philosophical expertise

There are several problems with what has been called the "expertise defense" of the reliability of philosophers' intuitions. One is that the moral intuitions of some past philosophers have been radically mistaken. Anderson cites Hastings Rashdall, a distinguished Oxford philosopher and utilitarian theorist, who wrote,

(P)robably no one will hesitate (to agree that)...the lower Well-being...of countless Chinamen or Negroes must be sacrificed that a higher life may be possible for a much smaller number of white men. (quoted by Anderson, 2015, pp. 26-27).

More recently, experimental philosophers have found that professional philosophers are equally or even more susceptible than non-philosophers to irrelevant influences on their intuitions (Schwitzgebel and Cushman, 2012).

Furthermore, as noted above, professional analytic philosophers are still drawn mainly from a narrow and unrepresentative segment of the general population (Schwitzgebel et al., 2021). Most analytic philosophers have been trained in wealthy Anglophone countries and, as Steven Stich has observed, many have spent time in a few hothouse philosophical institutions. Our profession is indisputably WEIRD, in the sense that most academic philosophers come from populations that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic, and we have noted already that cognitive scientists have found that the intuitions of people who are demographically WEIRD are often also weird in the sense of being anomalous (Henrich,

Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). Taking all this into account, privileging philosophers' intuitions is likely to favor the epistemic and moral perspectives of the relatively narrow demographic groups to which philosophers belong. So long as philosophers continue to be drawn disproportionately from relatively privileged groups, taking their moral intuitions to be authoritative risks perpetuating and legitimating systematic moral biases by class, gender, race, ethnicity, and empire.

## 6. Can intuitions justify moral claims?

One lesson to draw from our discussion is that philosophers must be cautious in generalizing from "our" intuitions, which may well diverge from those of non-philosophers. This narrowness may be alleviated by experimental philosophy, which can help in obtaining reports of many non-philosophers' intuitions, but even the most comprehensive survey of intuitions is insufficient to ground moral knowledge. Surveys provide information about people's moral beliefs, but they can never show that those beliefs are justified. No amount of empirical research can show that even widely shared intuitive responses offer reliable moral guidance—just as the fact that something is universally desired does not show that it is desirable—*pace* J. S. Mill.

This reflection, coupled with the other issues we have noted, raises the epistemological question of whether moral intuitions have any evidential weight at all. Should they simply be disregarded by people seeking moral knowledge? Our answer to this question is no. In our view, intuitions are indispensable to moral reasoning. Without moral intuitions, morality cannot get off the ground; indeed, people who lack moral intuitions are psychopaths. Moreover, in contexts of social domination those with less social power may have moral intuitions about the status quo that run counter to intuitions of dominant group members and provide a moral clue that prompts further investigation about whether a situation is unjust (Jaggar, 1989). Yet although intuitions are vital components of moral knowledge, they are not the only components, nor are they indisputable insights or moral certainties, fixed points that moral knowledge must accommodate or foundations on which moral knowledge must be built. Intuitions can serve as evidence for moral knowledge only when they have been selected and refined by just methods. Several epistemological traditions can contribute to bridging the gap between intuitions and normative claims. They include social epistemology, standpoint theory, pragmatism, and the literature on epistemic justice.

First, reliable moral knowledge can be produced only via interactive processes. The production of knowledge is a collective rather than individual enterprise and social epistemology explores how people can build knowledge together with others. Discourse ethics is probably the best-known version of social epistemology in the domain of morality (Habermas, 1990). As Habermas explains, socializing the production of moral knowledge provides opportunities for critically assessing our own intuitions as well as those of others, helping everyone to recognize individual prejudice, bias, and dogmatism.

In the context of socialized moral reasoning, individuals can retain moral and epistemic autonomy only if the interactive reasoning processes in which they participate allow each person's moral sensibilities to be considered fairly. The language of epistemic justice has become a widely accepted way of expressing this requirement (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic justice requires that all those deliberating about practical moral issues have a fair opportunity to articulate and develop their own intuitions as well as to hear and understand the intuitions of others. Without epistemic justice, there can be no moral autonomy.

Epistemic justice requires epistemic democracy, which is needed not only to preserve moral autonomy but also for epistemic reasons. Philosophers of science increasingly agree that good practices of scientific reasoning must be broadly democratic, at least among those with the relevant scientific credentials. Scientific reasoning practices that are democratic increase epistemic reliability by maximizing the hypotheses considered and opening them to informed criticism, though this is not to deny that what counts as democratic reasoning is contestable and that philosophers of science have interpreted it in several different ways (Longino, 1990; Kitcher, 2001). Practices of scientific reasoning are designed to produce reliable scientific claims just as practices of moral justification are designed to produce authoritative normative claims, and democratic reasoning increases the epistemic reliability of moral claims just as it increases the reliability of scientific claims. All people are potential moral reasoners and have a wide range of relevant skills and experiences that bear on collective moral understanding. Philosophers' training can be useful but developing moral knowledge requires more than skills in logic and analysis; it also requires as wide a range as possible of moral experiences and perceptions. Some people may have access to relevant sources of moral knowledge that others do not or cannot directly access, such as gender- or race specific experiences, elder wisdom, or religious or spiritual experiences. For this reason, all people affected by a moral claim potentially have something valuable to contribute to discussing it.

Yet nominally democratic reasoning processes are often undermined by structural epistemic injustice. Structural epistemic injustice refers to background conditions that produce systematically unfair epistemic advantages and disadvantages for more and less powerful groups respectively, while also insulating the more powerful from recognizing those injustices. Anderson (2012) writes that even epistemic encounters that appear transactionally just when viewed in isolation may nonetheless be biased if they are embedded in contexts of structural injustice. For instance, there are often legitimate epistemic reasons for treating one speaker's testimony with skepticism and taking another's more seriously; it is not epistemically unjust and indeed is often wise to proportion the amount of credence we accord to speakers with differing credentials. Yet the background epistemic conditions may be such that some groups are systemically disadvantaged in acquiring legitimate credentials or in developing the linguistic resources that would enable them to express what they want to convey. Social relations of domination produce and maintain pervasive and persistent structural conditions that often corrupt group-based perceptions of trust and credibility germane to moral understanding. For instance, women's reports of pain are routinely discounted by health care



providers (Zhang et al., 2021) and their allegations of sexual assault trivialized or rationalized away (#MeToo). Reports by African Americans of police brutality are often disregarded or denied, even when they are documented by photographs and videos.

Recognizing the prevalence of structural epistemic injustice illuminates the problematic nature of several assumptions made by philosophers using the intuitionist methods that we have discussed. The first method presupposes that intuitions that appear self-evidently true deserve credence. The second method presupposes that pumping intuitions via analogies can help us identify the moral core of an issue. The third presupposes that moral expertise deserves epistemic deference. All these are reasonable assumptions for contexts of epistemic justice but they can lead us astray in contexts of domination. Self-evidence is linked with social positionality, so that members of groups with more social privilege are likely to be obstructed from perceptions that are immediately evident to many of those with less privilege. White abolitionists could recognize the physical cruelty suffered by slaves but it took black abolitionists to highlight the ways in which slaves were deprived of autonomy, dignity, honor and respect (Anderson, 2015). For this reason, analogies that seem indisputable to some people are clearly misleading to others; there are social perspectives from which people will easily see the shortcomings of shallow pond reasoning. As for moral expertise, it is implausible that analytic philosophers acquire it through their analytic training. As we have seen earlier, moral knowledge requires moral perception as well as logical skill and philosophers' social position may preclude them from important intuitions.

In circumstances of structural epistemic injustice, building trustworthy moral knowledge clearly requires developing strategies to make moral reasoning more democratic. For instance, in some contexts it might require according extra credence in specific contexts to the intuitions of people whose social position provides them with contingent advantages relative to specific epistemic purposes (Wylie, 2003). Exploring possible strategies goes beyond the scope of this paper, though we have done some of this work elsewhere (Tobin, 2011; Tobin and Jaggar, 2013; Jaggar and Tobin, 2013; Jaggar, 2019; Jaggar and Tobin, 2024).<sup>8</sup> Our main point here is that although intuitions are indispensable for justifying moral claims, they are no more than starting points for moral investigation. They can provide reliable evidence for or against moral claims only after they have been assessed and refined by democratic methods—by which point they are no longer directly apprehended intuitions.

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<sup>8</sup> We think our proposal is in line with recent work that has been called “the political turn in analytic philosophy” (Bordonaba-Plou, Fernández-Castro and Torices, 2022; Pinedo and Villanueva, 2022).





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