

Reason and Intuition in the Moral Life: A Cognitivist Defense of Moral Intuitions

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Abstract

It is common in moral philosophy to appeal to so-called “moral intuitions” about cases as a means of building and defending moral theories. Intuitions are often taken as the starting point for theories, and intuitions are tested against moral theories until reflective equilibrium is achieved. The process of reflective equilibrium is supposed to provide rational justification for moral theories and moral intuitions, but any explanation of how moral intuitions could be rationally grounded faces two distinct challenges. The first is that of moral dumbfounding, which seems to show that moral intuitions are arational emotional responses to situations that we then try to rationalize by appeal to socially accepted rules. The second challenge comes from the two-systems theory of reasoning, which generally holds that intuitions are not corrigible to explicitly reasoned theories, and therefore not subject to rational revision. This paper addresses both of these challenges, and draws upon a recent model of the mental architecture subserving norms to show “how possibly” the two-systems theory of rationality can actually support the view that moral intuitions can be subject to rational criticism and modified by explicit reasoning. This model, suitably filled out, demonstrates how reflective equilibrium can be psychologically realized, and thus, how moral intuitions can be rationally grounded.