

Trusting Our Instincts: Evaluating the Evolutionary and Rational Foundations of Moral Intuitions

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Author Biography

Anwen Hao is a senior at The Harker School in San Jose, California. Anwen is interested in the subjects philosophy and history, and in the future he wishes to pursue a career in law. He first gained interest in writing this particular article after learning about various moral and ethical theories, and he wanted to investigate how humans come up with moral conclusions. In his free time, he enjoys dancing ballet and fencing. Anwen also enjoys taking care of and playing with his two pet cats.

Abstract

This paper delves into the nature and reliability of moral intuitions, building upon Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist model, which suggests that moral judgments stem from instinctive reactions followed by rational justifications. By examining Haidt's experiments, which reveal the primacy of intuitive responses over rational deliberation, this paper seeks to address whether we have valid reasons to trust these moral intuitions. Drawing from evolutionary psychology, it argues that moral intuitions have historically contributed to the survival and success of the human species, thereby providing them with normative value. However, given the rapid advancements in technology and societal changes, these intuitions may sometimes lead to nonoptimal or disastrous outcomes. The paper proposes a rational test to determine the reliability of moral intuitions: we should trust an intuition if its generalized application benefits the human species. Potential counterarguments, such as the historical misuse of evolutionary logic in eugenics, are addressed to underscore the validity of this test. The conclusion emphasizes that while moral intuitions are generally trustworthy due to their evolutionary roots, rational thought must intervene when intuitions become outdated in the face of contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Moral Intuitions, Social Intuitionist Model, Rational Deliberation, Evolutionary Psychology, Jonathan Haidt, David Hume, Moral Judgment, Ethical Reasoning, Evolutionary Success, Moral Foundations Theory

Introduction

Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt asked subjects whether they thought the characters in the following scenario did anything morally wrong:

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love? (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1024)

Haidt found that subjects immediately determined that their behavior was morally wrong, and began to rationalize about why they thought so. Eventually, they realize that there is nothing in the story that they can identify that justifies their moral judgment: if they argue that inbreeding is harmful, they realize that Julie and Mark took necessary birth control measures. If they argue that Julie and Mark will be traumatized by the event, they are reminded that their behavior was perfectly voluntary. After each of their arguments are struck down, the subjects still conclude that Julie and Mark's behavior was wrong, even if there is no rational reason (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1024).

The above story was one among many that Haidt gave his experimental subjects to observe their responses. Other stories that Haidt created include eating one's own pet dog after it has been killed in a car accident and having sex with a chicken before eating it. These were undoubtedly gruesome scenarios, but in each, no character in the story was harmed in any way. Responses to all of these stories were similar: subjects would have an instinctive reaction and conclude that the actions were morally wrong, but struggled to come up with a rational reason to justify their conclusion (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1028).

Some philosophers and psychologists have advocated for the rationalist model, which emphasizes the importance of rational deliberation in the leadup

to moral judgment (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1026-1028). However, Haidt's experiments suggest that moral judgments are not the result of rational deliberation, but rather the result of instinctive reactions (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1027-1028). Haidt offered an alternative approach to moral judgments that he calls the social intuitionist model: upon hearing a situation, people first have an instinctive moral judgment, and then reason strategically to justify their conclusion (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1028). Haidt uses the analogy of a lawyer and a client. People seek evidence that supports their initial intuition, like how a lawyer builds the best case for the client, rather than deliberate extensively and consider evidence exhaustively like a judge (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1025). This model echoes philosopher David Hume's argument nearly three centuries ago: "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Hume & Mossner, 2005, p. 462).

According to Haidt's theory, moral intuitions are certainly an integral part of moral judgment. Given the primacy of moral intuitions, the original question is certainly relevant: Do we have any good reasons to trust our moral intuition? In Haidt's original paper, Haidt emphasized that he was avoiding answering such a question: "[The social intuitionist model] says that moral reasoning is rarely the direct cause of moral judgment. That is a descriptive claim, about how moral judgments are actually made. It is not a normative or prescriptive claim, about how moral judgments ought to be made" (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1025).

In this paper, I aim to argue that the evolutionary success of moral intuitions provides normative and prescriptive value: we do have good reason to trust our moral intuitions. I will then address a second question of under what circumstances we should trust our moral intuitions. I will argue for the importance of asking this second question as the paper progresses.

Evolutionary Value of Moral Intuitions

We do have good reason to trust our moral intuition because of its origins in our evolutionary history. According to Haidt, people's sense of morality can be traced back to primate ancestors. Research has found that primates like chimpanzees develop

norms on how we should interact with each other. These norms are enforced by the community, and the animals develop a primitive sense of what is right and wrong. This development of norms is carried over to human communities, though human communities have a stronger sense of enforcement by the broader community (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1040-1041). As time progresses, the norms that lead to success for the species are kept and passed down, while those that do not are selected against (Haidt, 2013, p. 146-147).

Haidt has found that there are around five main norms, or foundations, that have solidified in the human community, each of which have evolved from an adaptive challenge. People base their moral judgments on these intuitive moral foundations (Haidt, 2013, p. 144-146). For example, the sanctity/degradation foundation evolved from the need to navigate a world full of diseases and pathogens. Today, this translates into the “openness to experience” trait, where people welcome exposures to new experiences, things, and people. On the other end of the spectrum, this foundation can also cause xenophobia (Haidt, 2013, p. 170-177). The other four foundations have similarly evolved from other evolutionary situations. I will be referencing sanctity/degradation later on when I discuss moral intuitions in action.

Limitations of Moral Intuitions and the Role of Reason

These moral intuitions have worked well to ensure the survival of the human species. However, Haidt cautions that previous research has shown that “people following their moral intuitions often bring about nonoptimal or even disastrous consequences in matters of public policy, public health, and the tort system” (Haidt, 1995/2008, p. 1025). If intuitions have worked well in the scope of evolutionary history, why does it lead to these “disastrous consequences?”

The above question illustrates the necessity of addressing the second question of under what circumstances we should trust our moral intuitions. As human technologies advance and our control over our surroundings grows stronger, the evolution of our moral intuitions cannot adapt quickly enough to keep up with the current situation, rendering certain intuitions obsolete. In this case, we will need to rely on rational thought, which adapts almost as fast as the

environment changes. Instead of relying on evolution, which requires generations of genetic change to determine which intuitions are best for the species, we rely on reasoning to expedite the process and test whether the intuition is reasonable. Given this, our test emerges quite naturally: we trust a given moral intuition if the moral judgment from that intuition generalized to the entire human population advances the interest of the species.

To illustrate, consider the case of cloning animals and the possibility of cloning humans. Some people may deem cloning morally wrong based on an initial reaction of disgust based on the sanctity/degradation foundation. People who are reserved about the use of technology may shun the possibility of going into uncharted territory (Haidt, 2013, p. 176-177). In this case, philosopher Leon Kass observes that in the current age of technology, previously insurmountable barriers are now able to be overcome and the frontiers of science are being expanded. In a time where humans possess almost godlike power, disgust may be the only way to protect humanity from itself and preserve its essence. As he put it, “repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound” (Kass, 1998, p. 687).

To apply the test, we need to consider the possible outcomes of generalizing the technology of cloning. Because we are only projecting or predicting future outcomes, we can portray this technology as both positive and negative. One potential negative outcome is that clones are exploited as second-class citizens. Another potential outcome is the loss of genetic diversity, which makes the human species more susceptible to disease and extinction. At the same time, cloning can be used to increase the availability of organ donations and increase supply of tissues for transplant. Because we currently do not have enough information to decide whether this technology will truly be beneficial or harmful to the species, we cannot conclude definitively whether we should trust our intuition of disgust. Our best option would be to proceed with caution and avoid implementing this technology at a large scale over a short amount of time.

Potential Counterarguments and Responses

It is worth mentioning a strong assumption that I established as my premise: the survival of the human species is moral. Potential counterarguments to my thesis may point to this fundamental assumption as a weak point. If the survival of humanity is not moral, then it would be immoral to decide what would be evolutionarily beneficial because what is evolutionarily beneficial leads to greater chances of humanity's survival. Ultimately, I argue that this is not an unreasonable premise upon which to argue. Indeed, the entire conception of morality is to build human societies based on rules that ensure that all members thrive, so if we doubt the notion that human survival is moral, then we defeat the entire purpose of the field of morality.

In addition, critics may point to instances in history where this sort of thinking had been misapplied. One of the most horrific examples of this is eugenics, an episode in history where scientists used the notion that some genes are "better" than others and should be selectively bred to enhance the genetic makeup of the species. Even though challengers to my argument may argue that this movement is caused by a fundamental, logical problem with my test, eugenics is in reality simply a naive and incorrect application of the test. On the surface, this practice seems to advance the interest of the species, but upon closer inspection and a more precise application of the test, we find that eugenics is not moral because this ideology has been used to discriminate and justify racist policies that will lead to hatred and destructive relationships and hierarchies among people that is counterproductive to the survival of the species. Eugenacists can misconstrue the evolutionary test to justify their policies, but that does not mean that the test is inherently wrong.

Another criticism of my test for morality is that the test seems to be sometimes impractical to use. When information is incomplete, it seems like we cannot find a definitive conclusion as to whether a moral action, if generalized, leads to the betterment of the species. I argue that though practicality is a virtue for a theory, it is a secondary virtue. Practicality cannot come at a cost of logical validity. As long as the test is logically coherent and sound, we have good reason to trust it. The test is only impractical because

of a lack of human foresight into the future. This lack of foresight will eventually be overcome as time goes on and as our understanding of uncertainties develops. Therefore, the test should not be abandoned simply because it can be deficient in utility.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to take Haidt's descriptive theory a step further. He has devised a model that better explains the instinctive reactions of subjects toward morally complicated situations. However, he has not approached the question of whether we should rely on moral intuitions. I have argued that because moral intuitions have ensured the success of the species for generations, we should trust them to a degree. At the same time, I cautioned against blind adherence to intuitions because our surroundings are changing at a faster rate than our evolution can keep up. So, I combined the legitimacy of moral intuitions with the necessity of expediting the evolutionary process to come up with a test based on rational reasoning that determines whether a specific moral intuition should be trusted.

Ultimately, we do have good reason to trust moral intuitions, but when the present renders intuition obsolete, rational thought can step in to make the best judgment.

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