

Comments on Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
Michael DePaul

1. The Objects of Moral Intuitions.

After noting that various types of propositions can be the objects of moral intuitions, S-A states, “We will focus on moral intuitions about concrete cases.”

I’m not sure what concrete cases are, but I think it would be somewhat odd to call a hypothetical example a concrete case. So my first guess would be that “concrete cases” are “actual particular cases.” But as the paper proceeds, it doesn’t seem that any cases that are concrete in this sense are used. I assume, e.g., that the subjects in the one study did not consider a real live family eating its dead pet dog.

There may be a significant issue here. Philosophers seem to suppose that there is a clear difference between what are often called particular cases and general principles. But unless an actual case is at issue, I’m not sure there is any. Consider this example:

A family’s pet dog is killed in an accident. They dress the carcass, cook it, and eat the dog.

Suppose S judges that this action is wrong.

Now suppose the following general principle is the object of one of S’s moral intuitions.

Breaking a promise is wrong.

In both cases all you really have is a natural property: *eating one’s pet dog that was killed in an accident* in the one case and *breaking a promise* in the other. And in both cases, S judges that actions having the property are wrong. In both cases, many actions could have the natural property in question. So it seems the object of the supposedly particular intuition is actually general just as the general principle is.

One might object that the general principles have universal quantifiers that are lacking in particular hypothetical examples. I’m not so sure. No names or other apparently designating terms in the statement of the hypothetical examples really refer to anything. They are merely place holders. In effect, the example presents us with an open sentence. I think it likely that when someone makes a judgment about such a case, he or she implicitly fills in universal quantifiers to get a general principle, with is the object of the judgment or intuition.

I wouldn’t think any good would come from perpetuating the illusion that there is some fundamental formal or logical difference between moral judgments regarding “particular” hypothetical cases and moral judgments regarding general principles. One possible harm: The illusion might incline us to automatically assimilate judgments regarding hypothetical cases to

judgments regarding real cases, when they might in fact be more closely analogous to judgments regarding general principles.

I'm unsure about judgments regarding real cases, but I wonder whether many such judgments are not in fact best construed in the way I have suggested we should view judgments regarding supposedly particular hypothetical examples. S reads in the paper that Wilmer Lovett raped and murdered a 77 year old widow named Doris Gearheart. No more details are given about the case. S has an intuition that this action was morally wrong. Does S really do anything other than judge that any rape and murder of a 77 year old woman is wrong?

Of course, none of this may have a bearing on S-A's position. I'm not sure as I do not know how to align "concrete cases" with the types of propositions I've mentioned.

2. Perceptual Models

S-A considers and rejects three possible perceptual models for moral intuitions before exploring his preferred heuristic. I would like to very briefly mention a perceptual model he does not consider and disagree with the reason for rejecting one of the possible models he does consider.

Some authors claim moral intuitions are similar to the sort of intuitive perception we have of some mathematical propositions. S-A claims that this is not a good model because moral claims are defeasible by future information while mathematical claims are not. But to mimic his approach — NO. Perhaps such a simple mathematical intuition as $1+2=3$ cannot be defeated, but more complicated mathematical intuitions certainly can be. Many intuitively believed the naïve comprehension axiom prior to the discovery of the Russell Paradox. There are more prosaic examples: I consider the numbers 35.97 and 22.49. I see, or seem to see, that they sum to 58.46. But my belief could certainly be defeated, say if someone told me that the sum I got was different from what they got using a calculator.

S-A considers the suggestion that moral intuition might be analogous to the perception of color or shape. He claims it fails because we cite non-moral properties to justify moral beliefs, but do not cite non-color or non-shape properties to justify color or shape beliefs. In addition, one can perceive the color or shape of a thing without knowing "what it is or anything else about it." Not so for moral beliefs. He also rejects scientific perception as an analog for moral perception. But he does not consider any possible analogs that fall, as we might say, in between. Some writers — e.g., me — have suggested that moral perception might be analogous to spontaneously formed perceptual beliefs that it takes some training or experience to make. Consider, e.g., the visual identification of birds. I catch a glimpse of a bird through foliage in the middle distance and spontaneously believe it is a pileated woodpecker. Such a perceptual belief shares the very features with moral beliefs that S-A cites to argue that perception of color or shape is not analogous with moral perception. In addition, such spontaneous perceptual beliefs do not seem to be dependent upon scientific theories in the way scientific perceptions are. This leaves the other disanalogy between scientific beliefs and moral perceptions that S-A cites: one can know certain acts are wrong without ever seeing them committed, but one needs to actually see something to know via scientific perception. Perceptions that things are of certain kinds seem to share this feature with scientific perception. If this appearance holds up, then even perceptions

that things are of certain kinds does not provide an exact analog for moral perception. But it does not follow immediately follow that the analogy is not close enough to be significant. And I am not sure that the appearance does hold up. E.g., once one knows what pileated woodpeckers are, one can know various things without seeing anything at all, e.g., that pileated woodpeckers have red tufts on their heads or that the undersides of their wings are black and white.

3. Narrow Heuristics: How Narrow?

S-A argues that moral intuitions arise from “narrow heuristics,” which are “unconscious attribute substitution[s].” He explains, “A person wants to determine whether an object, X, has a target attribute. This target attribute is difficult to detect directly, often because of lack of information or time. Hence, instead of asking directly about the target attribute, the believer asks about a different attribute, the heuristic attribute, which is easier to detect. If the person detects the heuristic attribute, then the person forms the belief that the object has the target attribute.” [p. 4]

I wonder whether this characterization is narrow enough.

Suppose you ask me what I ate yesterday. I seem to remember having a chocolate iced donut with a cup of coffee on the way here. I immediately form the belief that I ate a donut. A strong case can be made for saying this fits S-A’s characterization of a narrow heuristic. First, the attribute of seeming to remember having done A yesterday is certainly more easily detectable than the attribute of having done A yesterday. Was the attribute substitution unconscious? In our ordinary lives we move from the experience of seeming to remember to beliefs about the past so quickly and seamlessly, so automatically, that we are not ordinarily conscious of our doing so. We can become conscious of it, but isn’t that true of heuristics more generally? So memory beliefs turn out to result from a narrow heuristic, or at least something very much like a narrow heuristic.

Consider a very simple case of perception. I look at a Granny Smith apple on the table and believe “the apple is green.” Goodness only knows what greenness — the property had by some middle sized objects “out in the world” — is, but I don’t think it is directly accessible. But the property of “seeming green” or “appearing green” is. I think a good case could be made for saying that in forming my belief that the apple is green I have unconsciously substituted this directly accessible property for the inaccessible target property.

Perhaps this is mistaken. Maybe the property of greenness had by the apple is easily accessible. But what about more complicated properties attributed on the basis of perception? Suppose I instead form the belief that the apple is a Granny Smith. Certainly this property is rather inaccessible, since ultimately this is a matter being the fruit of a tree with certain specific DNA, since all Granny Smith trees are clones of the original Granny Smith tree. As my belief was formed immediately and automatically on the basis of the way the apple appeared upon a quick look, it would seem that I must have unconsciously substituted the easily accessible property of appearing this way for the inaccessible property of being a Granny Smith.

Similarly for many other cases: I taste the soup and form the belief that it has tarragon in it. I smell the perfume and believe it has a hint of vanilla. If I am on the right track, it seems that

many ordinary perceptual beliefs are produced by narrow heuristics, or processes that are at least very much like narrow heuristics.

Here's one final example. I scan a series of numbers 5, 3, 7 and form the belief that they sum to 15. Why do I believe this? About the best I can do is to say that it just seems to me that 15 is the sum of these three numbers. Certainly this *seeming* is not the same thing as being the sum of the three numbers. But once again the transition from the seeming to the belief about the sum is so fast and automatic that I would think a strong case can be made for saying that it involves an automatic, unconscious substitution of an easily accessible property for a more inaccessible property. If this is right, the same will be true of our beliefs in many simple mathematical and logical propositions — the sorts of propositions traditionally take as the objects of a priori intuitions.

Perhaps S-A would distinguish these cases from narrow heuristics on the ground that when asked for reasons subjects would cite such things as *seeming* to remember, something *appearing*, *tasting* or *smelling* a certain way, or its *seeming* that a series of numbers sum to X. Whether subjects would cite such subjective states is of course an empirical question, so I'm just speculating. But in my limited experience the folk do not often appeal to such seemings. In the case of the memory belief, I think a more common answer might be something like, "There is an empty Dunkin Donuts bag on the floor of my car." And in the case of the sum, I bet you would get "Well, 5 and 3 is 8 and 8 and 7 is 15." This of course just pushes the basic problem back, but if pressed for a reason for thinking 5 and 3 makes 8, I think it is as likely the subject would get flustered and refuse to answer as that he or she report how things seem. It may be more likely appearances would be cited in the perceptual cases, but I'm not sure of this. Even if subjects did cite such appearances after the fact as reasons for belief, it is not immediately obvious that this constitutes a significant disanalogy between the cases. Since I'm indulging myself in speculations about how people might respond to requests for reasons, I might as well make one more: people often do cite their feelings of disgust when asked to provide reasons for their moral intuitions. In particular, I would be very surprised if no one who judged the action involving the chicken carcass wrong replied "That's disgusting!" when asked for a reason. Would S-A take this answer as evidence that the persons who give it did not form their moral intuitions as a result of the affect heuristic?

What's my point in pointing out that these other types of beliefs seem to fit the narrow heuristic model? After all, one conclusion of the psychological research is that a whole lot of our beliefs result from heuristics. Well, if S-A's big news is that moral intuitions are in fact the products of heuristics, and he piques our interest in this news by suggesting that moral intuitions may be "like mirages or seeing pink elephants on LSD," [1] then it seems to me the headline is being hyped, at least to some extent, if it turns out that all sorts of perfectly respectable beliefs, such as memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs and beliefs in simple mathematical propositions are produced by the same sort of "heuristic" process, or even by processes that are not distinguished from heuristics in any obviously significant way.

4. How Unreliable is the Affect Heuristic?

To be fair to S-A, the passage I have just cited occurs in the course of cautioning *against* moving too quickly from psychological findings regarding how moral intuitions arise to negative conclusions regarding the epistemic status of moral intuitions. He merely wants to say that we should be interested in how moral intuitions are produced because “[m]oral intuitions are unreliable to the extent that morally irrelevant factors affect” them and “[i]t is only when beliefs arise in more reputable ways that they have a fighting chance of being justified.” [1] But of course, given that the account S-A pushes holds that moral intuitions are produced by a heuristic that substitutes certain sorts of affect, e.g., feelings of disgust, for moral properties, it is hard to avoid the sense that one is at least being invited to conclude the syllogism. The feelings we have upon considering an action, person or event are obviously morally irrelevant to the moral status of that action, person or event. (Isn’t this all the more obvious once we realize these feeling can be altered by sitting at a dirty desk next to a full trash bin?) So if moral intuitions are produced by a process of unconsciously substituting such feelings for moral attributes, they are not produced in a remotely reputable way.

Perhaps I’m jumping to conclusions about how dim a view of moral intuitions S-A wants to press. But if I am not, then even if we grant his position regarding the processes that produce moral intuitions, I do not think that he has made a strong case for the unreliability of moral intuitions.

For one thing, S-A does not argue that all moral intuitions are produced by the affect heuristic, indeed, he allows that some moral intuitions might be produced by other processes. Since we are not told much about these processes, the possibility remains open that the moral intuitions produced by these processes are quite reliable, and hence there is a fighting chance that these intuitions are justified, even if the intuitions produced by the affect heuristic are unjustified. I think that this possibility is potentially significant with respect to the use philosophers make of moral intuitions. These intuitions typically concern rather abstractly characterized hypothetical examples — not exactly the sort of case that provokes an emotional response. In addition, it is common to find philosophers proposing that we rely on judgments made in a cool moment and explicitly excluding those accompanied by strong emotions. Perhaps S-A would want to say that this does not really help since the substitution of affective response for the target moral attribute is unconscious. But I do not think the proposal is that these affective states are unconscious; after all, in addition to being emotions they are supposed to be easily accessible. While Freudian psychoanalysts might contemn unconscious emotions, even they would not think such emotions are readily accessible.

But let’s ignore this possibility and focus on those moral intuitions that are produced by the affect heuristic. Should we regard such intuitions as unreliable? Only if we have reason to believe that the relevant emotional responses are insufficiently well correlated with the target moral attribute. S-A has offered nothing like an argument for this conclusion. He has described some striking situations where it seems clear that moral intuitions produced by an affect heuristic go wrong. But if we concluded from this that moral intuitions produced in this way are unlikely to be true — well, I think we would be falling victim to one of those nasty heuristics that produce erroneous probability judgments. We would be ignoring the vast number of cases where moral emotions march in lock step with the target moral attributes: let’s not forget all those ordinary cases where we are angry with liars, cheats, hypocrites, bullies, rapists, murderers, child

molesters, etc.; all the cases where we feel guilty for the harms we've done, the promises we've broken, and so on. Sure, there are cases where someone finds the thought of gay sex disgusting or is outraged by the sight of an interracial couple, and judges the action wrong, but these are the exceptions.

Finally, these days the majority of moral intuitionists hold that moral intuitions are only prima facie justified, that one should reflect on them and attempt to integrate them into a coherent moral system, and that they are to be rejected if this cannot be done. Even supposing moral intuitions are the products of the affect heuristic, it is not at all clear that they are so unreliable that they cannot play the role contemporary intuitionists assign to them.

I should make it clear that the difference between S-A and me regarding this issue may in fact only be one of emphasis. His official position is, I think, best expressed by passages like the following:

[T]he view that moral intuitions result from heuristics raises doubts about whether and when we should trust moral intuitions. Just as non-moral heuristics lack accuracy in unusual situations, so do moral intuitions, if they are based on moral heuristics. It would be interesting and important (though challenging) to do the empirical work needed to determine which moral intuitions are reliable in which circumstances. [15]

I find it hard to disagree with that. I'm optimistic that if we did this empirical work we would find that moral intuitions are plenty reliable to play the epistemic and methodological roles (some) contemporary moral intuitionists assign to them. S-A seems to be more pessimistic. (On a personal note, it is rather pleasant to end up being more up beat than just about anyone about just about anything for a change. Those SSRIs must be kicking in!)

6. How Did We Figure Out What the Target Moral Attribute Is?

One last, very quick point. Throughout his discussion S-A seems to suppose that it is possible to work out a reasonably good understanding of the nature of the target moral attributes. Given such an understanding, it is possible to form beliefs regarding these moral attributes in more rational, consciously monitorable ways rather than by using the affect heuristic. E.g., if we have a broadly consequentialist understanding of moral rightness, we can consider what sorts of effects a particular action or type of action is likely to have on human well being and form moral beliefs on this basis. Thus, even if we find the thought of some action absolutely disgusting, and therefore intuitively believe it to be wrong, if we just got over the moral intuition and rationally investigated the action, we might find that in fact it contributes to rather than detracts from human well being. And we could then form a much more reliable, and highly justified belief in the moral acceptability of this intuitively wrong action.

I wouldn't want to deny any of this. I'm just at a loss as to how we could ever develop any sort of account of moral attributes without making any use of any moral intuitions at all.