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REVISIONARY INTUITIONISM*

By Michael Huemer

I. A Conservative Metaethics?

Ethical intuitionism is often associated with a conservative approach to normative ethics, an approach that embraces common-sense morality with at most minor revisions. This association seems to be borne out by W. D. Ross's blandly conventional characterization of our "prima facie duties," which, in his view, include such duties as keeping promises, showing gratitude to benefactors, improving oneself, avoiding injury to others, and so on. When these prima facie duties come into conflict, one must simply exercise one's best judgment, intuitively, to decide which obligation is more pressing in the circumstances. This system of duties, Ross explains, derives from the prephilosophical convictions of "the plain man": "The main moral convictions of the plain man seem to me to be, not opinions which it is for philosophy to prove or disprove, but knowledge from the start."[1] H. A. Prichard, the father of twentieth-century intuitionism, took a stance no less conservative. In his view, the characteristic mistake of moral philosophy is that of seeking further justification for our prereflective moral convictions; in reality, the only knowledge moral philosophy can bestow on us is the knowledge of the self-evidence of the principles of obligation comprising common-sense morality.[2]

This alliance between intuitionism and common-sense morality at first seems natural, perhaps even inevitable. The core epistemological thesis from which intuitionism takes its name is that all moral knowledge derives its justification from certain "intuitive" moral truths. One natural way of understanding the notion of an *intuitive* moral claim is simply as a claim that *seems* correct, prior to reasoning. If morality is to be based on such seemingly-correct moral claims, it is only reasonable to take into account what seems true to most people: if I take my own moral intuitions as evidence of moral reality, then presumably I should recognize the moral intuitions of others as equally evidence of moral reality, absent special evidence of cognitive defects on their part or exceptional cognitive abilities on my part. And once one takes this epistemological stance, it seems

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[1] W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), 21–22.

[2] H. A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in Prichard, *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 16.

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natural, perhaps inevitable, that one will more or less embrace the moral beliefs that seem right to most people—in short, common-sense morality.

Pace Prichard, *some* revisions to common-sense morality may be called for. For it may emerge that some of our prephilosophical moral beliefs are mutually inconsistent or paradoxical. In such a case, one would expect the ethical intuitionist to endorse whatever resolution of the moral paradox is *best supported by intuition*—which is to say, to recommend the smallest revision to common-sense morality that restores coherence to our moral belief system, taking into account both the number of beliefs that must be revised and the strength of the relevant intuitions. This seems to be the essence of the widely accepted method of "reflective equilibrium."[3] We would expect that such a method, if it generates any moral system, would lead to a moral system reasonably close to common-sense morality. In short, it seems that the epistemology of intuitionism supports the method of reflective equilibrium, which in turn supports common-sense morality, with at most minor revisions.

This, I intend to argue, is a mistake. Intuitionists need not embrace anything close to common-sense morality. Instead, intuitionists may, and probably should, adopt revisionary ethical views, rejecting a wide range of commonly accepted, prephilosophical moral beliefs. Indeed, I believe intuitionists are better positioned than partisans of most alternative conceptions of ethics to motivate a rejection of common-sense morality. This fact derives partly from the staunch realism of ethical intuitionism, and partly from the evidence, often cited by critics of intuitionism, of nonrational biases contaminating common moral judgments.

In the following discussion, after briefly describing the doctrine of ethical intuitionism, I shall review some important challenges to the validity of intuition as a source of moral knowledge. According to these challenges, many of our ethical intuitions can be explained as products of emotional and other nonrational biases, and for that reason cannot be taken as pointing us toward any objective moral truths. Traditionally, this sort of challenge is thought to support the conclusion, either that ethics is subjective, or that, if there are objective moral truths, we are not in a position to know those truths. I shall argue that the intuitionist may recognize the seriousness of the challenges to the reliability of intuition, without giving in to subjectivism or skepticism. The proper response for

[3] The method of reflective equilibrium, as initially described by John Rawls, calls for one to consider intuitively plausible general theories that come close to systematizing one's moral judgments about particular situations, and then to adjust both one's moral judgments about particular situations and one's moral theories to bring them into harmony with each other. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 48–49. The method is now often understood in a broader sense, to include any process of weighing conflicting beliefs against each other and renouncing the less plausible beliefs in order to restore coherence to one's belief system. For a defense of the method, see Michael DePaul, "The Problem of the Criterion and Coherence Methods in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988): 67–86.

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an intuitionist, rather than renouncing the possibility of objective moral knowledge, is to adopt a critical methodology in which the kinds of intuitions that are most subject to bias are discounted, while intuitions that are less prone to bias are given more weight. The end result will most likely be a revisionary ethical theory.

II. The Commitments of Ethical Intuitionism

A number of doctrines have gone under the name of "ethical intuitionism," from G. E. Moore's conception of primitive, "non-natural" ethical properties, to Ross's theory of multiple basic "prima facie duties," to Prichard's doctrine of the self-evidence of obligations.[4] Here I shall focus on two claims central to the version of ethical intuitionism I defend.[5] The first of these claims is moral realism: the sort of intuitionism in which I am interested takes at least some evaluative claims to be objectively true, that is, true in virtue of facts existing independently of our attitudes toward the objects of evaluation. For instance, "Torturing puppies is wrong" is made true by the fact that torturing puppies is (in normal conditions) wrong, which holds regardless of how we feel or what we believe about the torture of puppies. The thesis is both ontological and semantic: objective moral facts exist, and moral language is about them.

Second, my intuitionism embraces an epistemological doctrine to the effect that all justification for evaluative beliefs derives ultimately from intuition. There are at least two ways in which the notion of intuition may be understood. On one account, intuitions are a species of beliefs, distinguished from other beliefs by the special way in which they are justified. Roughly, the idea is that for some propositions, one's *understanding* of them can itself be an adequate source of justification for *believing* them.[6] For example, once I understand the proposition "2 is less than 3," I am justified in believing it. This intuitive belief, then, requires an exercise of intelligence—I must intellectually grasp the proposition "2 is less than 3"—but it does not require inference or reasoning. That is, I do not derive the proposition "2 is less than 3" from any other propositions.

On another account, intuitions are a type of cognitive state distinct from belief, a state that one sometimes avows by statements of the form, "It seems to me that *p*," or "It appears that *p*."[7] More specifically, intuitions are *initial intellectual appearances*, that is, states of its seeming to one that something is the case upon intellectual consideration (as opposed to

[4] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903); Ross, *The Right and the Good;* Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?"

[5] See my *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[6] See Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 33–36, 48–49.

[7] See Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism,* 99–104; George Bealer, "A Theory of the A Priori," in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: *Epistemology* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 30–31.

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sensory observation or introspection), but prior to reasoning. When one thinks about a proposition *p,* one often has the experience of seemingly "seeing" it to be true. This "seeing" is intellectual, rather than perceptual, but, unlike most intellectual cognition, it does not require reasoning from any further premises. Advocates of this account argue that intuitions are distinct from beliefs, since it is possible to have the intuition that *p* without believing that *p,* perhaps because one takes one's intuition to be unreliable or because one takes oneself to have overriding evidence against *p.* For example, most people who consider the comprehension axiom of naive set theory find it intuitive (it *seems* right), even those who know the axiom to be false because of the paradoxes it engenders.[8]

Although I favor the second account of intuition, either account will suffice for my purposes here. The key point for what follows is that intuitions are taken to be cognitive, intellectual states with propositional contents. Intuitions thus contrast with emotions, which are noncognitive; with sensory observations, which are nonintellectual; and with states of liking or dislike, which are noncognitive, nonintellectual, and perhaps nonpropositional.

How are these two principles—moral realism and the epistemological doctrine of intuitionism—related to each other? Given moral realism, the correct evaluative judgments are independent of what our intuitions are. Our having the intuition that *x* is wrong, no matter how many share the intuition, is compatible with *x*'s actually being permissible. The relationship between our intuitions and the moral facts is, in some important respects, analogous to the relationship between our observations and the physical facts about our environment: physical facts exist independently of our observations, but observations are our way of knowing about the physical facts; the function of observation, which it usually fulfills, is to correspond to the physical facts. Similarly, moral facts exist independently of our intuitions, but intuitions are our way of knowing about the moral facts; the function of ethical intuitions is to correspond to the moral facts. Sometimes our intuitions may deceive us, just as our senses may deceive us. Intuition may, in fact, be less reliable than sensory observation; nevertheless, *enough* of our intuitions are accurate that we can construct a substantial body of ethical knowledge.

The analogy between observation and intuition does not hold in all respects. The experience of seeing an object differs from that of having an intellectual intuition, and, more importantly, the explanation for the reliability of sensory observation presumably differs from the explanation for the reliability (such as it is) of intuition. Observations are reliable indicators of physical facts because of the way our sense organs are causally

[8] The comprehension axiom states that for any well-formed predicate, there exists a set containing all and only the things to which that predicate applies. This leads to a contradiction when the well-formed predicate "is not a member of itself" is introduced.

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connected to phenomena in the external world. The explanation for the reliability of intuition is more controversial. Perhaps the best explanation adverts to the notion of our grasping abstract objects; in any case, it presumably is not the same as the explanation for sensory observation.[9] This does not, however, defeat the point of the analogy I have drawn. The point I have made is simply that moral realism fits together with an intuitionist moral epistemology just as realism about external objects fits together with a broadly empiricist epistemology of the external world. Importantly, just as we must be on guard against sensory illusions, the intuitionist must be on guard against moral illusions.

III. Four Skeptical Challenges

In this section, I review four main kinds of challenges that have been posed to the validity of intuition as a source of moral knowledge. My aim here will not be to rebut these challenges, but rather to set out the moral skeptic's case as clearly as possible, and thus to indicate the seriousness of the problems that intuitionists face.

A. The incoherence of our intuitions

Some philosophers argue that our moral intuitions about many specific scenarios are influenced by factors that seem morally irrelevant. Thus, Peter Singer suggests that our intuitions about obligations to assist others in need are improperly influenced by the physical proximity of those others, so that we think we have much stronger obligations to people who are in front of us than to people who are thousands of miles away.[10] This may explain why most people consider it seriously wrong to refuse to save a child who is drowning in a shallow pond, just to avoid getting one's clothes wet and missing a lecture, yet few consider it seriously wrong to decline to save starving Third World children just to avoid giving up a few luxuries that one enjoys. On a similar note, Peter Unger argues at length that our intuitions about obligations to assist other people are improperly influenced by the *conspicuousness* of others' suffering. He goes on to argue that our intuitions about various cases also reflect such implausible rules as the following:

> First, when serious loss will result, it's harder to justify moving a person to, or into, an object than it is to move the object to, or into,

[9] Some philosophers argue that one's understanding of the natures of abstract objects—for example, the nature of *knowledge*, or of *value*—must lead one to have generally reliable intuitions about the properties of and relationships among these abstract objects. See Bealer, "A Theory of the A Priori," and my *Ethical Intuitionism*, 122–27, for discussion.

[10] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232.

> the person. Second, when serious loss will result, it's harder to justify changing the speed of a moving object, or changing its *rate* of motion, than changing the object's *direction* of motion. Third, when there'll be big loss, it's harder to justify speeding up an object than slowing down an object. Fourth, it's a lot harder to justify taking an object at rest and setting it in motion than to justify taking an object in motion and increasing its speed. . . . [Fifth,] it's harder to justify imposing a substantial force on an object than it is to justify allowing a force already present (just about) everywhere, like gravitation, to work on the object.[11]

Unger uses a complex series of hypothetical cases to argue that our intuitive reactions are best explained by the above sorts of rules. He finds these rules silly, and accordingly finds many of our unreflective moral reactions seriously flawed.

An intuitionist might observe that both Singer and Unger themselves rely on intuitions, even in their criticisms of other intuitions. Singer counts on the intuition that physical proximity is morally irrelevant, just as Unger counts on the intuition that the factors invoked in the five rules he describes above are morally irrelevant. Thus, their arguments do not impugn the reliability of intuition in general; Singer and Unger simply want to argue for preferring certain intuitions over others.[12]

However, a moral skeptic might well pose an argument less friendly to normative ethics than those of either Singer or Unger. Many of our moral intuitions clash with one another. For instance, most people share the following intuitions:

(a) Refusing to save the child in Singer's Shallow Pond example is seriously wrong.[13]
(b) Refusing to donate to famine relief is not seriously wrong.
(c) The conspicuousness of someone's suffering is not morally relevant to the obligation to assist them.

These intuitive claims stand in tension once we accept Unger's argument that conspicuousness explains the difference in our intuitions about the

[11] Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 101–2. Unger does not, however, argue for a general rejection of intuition. Rather, he believes that through philosophical reasoning, we can correct the distorting influences on our intuitions.

[12] Although Singer does not describe the moral premises he favors as "ethical intuitions," I think that is in fact what they are. See the discussion in my essay "Singer's Unstable Metaethics," in Jeffrey Schaler, ed., *Singer Under Fire* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, forthcoming).

[13] In this example, you see a child in danger of drowning in a shallow pond. Even though it will mean getting your clothes muddy and missing the lecture you were on your way to give, you clearly have a strong obligation to pull the child out of the pond. Singer thinks this is comparable to your obligation to donate money to save Third World children from malnutrition and disease (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 229–46).

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Shallow Pond and about famine relief. Singer and Unger would have us embrace (a) and (c) while rejecting (b). A moral skeptic, however, would have us withhold judgment. The skeptic might argue, to begin with, that Singer and Unger's position is not obviously the most intuitive resolution of the puzzle. On the Singer-Unger analysis of the cases, it is not just that we ought to donate some money to famine relief; rather, the failure to donate *almost all* of one's wealth and income to charity organizations is *morally comparable to murder.*[14] This view is not obviously much more plausible than either the denial of (a) or the denial of (c). Therefore, we should withhold judgment on what the proper resolution of the paradox is, if there is any proper resolution. Furthermore, the skeptic might argue that conflicts and tensions of this sort among our ethical intuitions are so common that we should infer that ethical intuition is an unreliable source of information, or at least that we are not justified in treating it as reliable. If this is true, then we should withhold judgment on ethical matters, even in cases in which our intuitions do not conflict with one another.

B. Cultural indoctrination

A second argument for the unreliability of ethical intuition (on the assumption that objective moral truths exist) points to the influence of culture on individuals' ethical intuitions, together with the wide variability of cultures.[15] In contemporary Western society, almost everyone considers such practices as polygamy, infanticide, and slavery to be clearly wrong. Yet each of these has been accepted in many cultures throughout world history.[16] Similarly, some other cultures have, without any sense of wrongness, practiced human sacrifice or cannibalism. While these facts about accepted practices do not directly prove anything about what *intuitions* people have, it seems very likely that members of those cultures practicing polygamy, infanticide, or slavery would have very different intuitions about those practices from ours. Most members of contemporary Western societies have an

[14] The reasoning is roughly as follows: Imagine that you have already donated most of your income to charity organizations working to relieve world poverty. Now, while walking past a shallow pond on your way to a philosophy lecture, you see a small child drowning. You could pull the child out, but doing so would get your clothes muddy and make you miss your lecture. Even so, it would be seriously wrong not to pull the child out. But, as Singer and Unger would argue, failure to save the drowning child in this circumstance is morally comparable to failure to save another starving child by sending money to UNICEF. Thus, even when you have already given away most of your money, you are still obligated to give more (Unger, *Living High and Letting Die,* 60–61, 135–39). Furthermore, since Singer rejects the moral significance of the distinction between killing and letting die, he holds that allowing people in the Third World to die is comparable to murder (Singer, *Practical Ethics,* 222–29).

[15] See John L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 36–38.

[16] J. Patrick Gray reports a total of 1,045 societies practicing at least occasional polygamy, compared with 186 exclusively monogamous societies; see Gray, "Ethnographic Atlas Codebook," *World Cultures* 10 (1998): 90.

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intuitive, negative evaluation of those practices, and it is hard to believe that the members of other societies would persist in those practices if they too had this intuitive reaction. It seems clear, then, that one's culture has a strong influence on one's ethical intuitions.

For a cultural relativist or subjectivist, this poses no problem; it just shows that the moral truth varies from one society to another. For a moral realist, however, a serious epistemological problem arises. The variation in moral intuitions across cultures strongly suggests that many or most intuitions—including, of course, one's own—are explained more by historical accident than by objective ethical truths, even if such truths exist. It seems that one should distrust many of one's own intuitions, unless one can somehow argue that one's own culture is special, having somehow developed a rapport with the moral truth that other cultures did not. One need not be a card-carrying multiculturalist to have doubts about the prospects for such an argument.

One might argue that modern Western culture has one very important advantage over most other cultures: a long and sophisticated tradition of rational moral philosophy. Modern Western values, it might be said, are largely a product of rational reflection by philosophers over a period of centuries, and therefore represent progress relative to value systems that held sway earlier in our history, as well as the value systems of societies without such a tradition of carefully reasoned moral philosophy.

The moral skeptic might respond that the only reason for taking the Western tradition of moral philosophy to give us access to moral truth rests on faith in the efficacy of moral reasoning, but that moral reasoning can do little in the way of securing moral truth if the starting premises of our reasoning—namely, our ethical intuitions—are compromised. Sharon Street articulates the skeptical argument as follows:

> [W]hat rational reflection about evaluative matters involves, inescapably, is assessing some evaluative judgements in terms of others. . . . Thus, if the fund of evaluative judgements with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence . . . then the tools of rational reflection were equally contaminated, for the latter are always just a subset of the former. It follows that all our reflection over the ages has really just been a process of assessing evaluative judgements that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark. And reflection of *this* kind isn't going to get one any closer to evaluative truth, any more than sorting through contaminated materials with contaminated tools is going to get one closer to purity.[17]

[17] Sharon Street makes these remarks regarding the biases supposedly generated by natural selection; see Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006): 124. Her ultimate conclusion favors some form of subjectivism.

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C. Biological programming

A third problem afflicting our moral intuitions is that of biases produced by evolutionary forces. Given the importance of ethical intuitions to human behavior, and presumably to our reproductive fitness, it is reasonable to speculate that natural selection might have favored predispositions toward certain kinds of intuitions over others. When we look at the content of most people's moral intuitions, many of them indeed look suspiciously like the sorts of intuitions natural selection might produce, and rather unlike products of impartial, intellectual reflection. Most people would probably find each of the following evaluative claims plausible:

(a) Individuals have much stronger obligations toward their own kin, especially their children, than toward others.
(b) Loyalty and devotion to one's own society, as above other societies, is a virtue. (In modern times, this virtue takes the form of patriotism.)
(c) Human beings are far more important than any other species, and human interests count, morally, for vastly more, if not infinitely more, than animal interests.
(d) Incest is inherently wrong, even in cases of mutual, informed consent.
(e) Sexual promiscuity is desirable for a male, but highly undesirable for a female.

It is difficult to explain why the above evaluations should be true, but it is easy to see why natural selection would have rewarded those who believed them.[18]

The fact that evolutionary pressures explain our having some cognitive or perceptual faculty does not *in general* undermine trust in that faculty. Evolution explains why we have eyes and ears, why we have the capacity for reasoning about the physical world, and why we have the capacity to learn languages. In none of these cases does an evolutionary account of the origin of our faculty undermine trust in that faculty: no one argues that our vision, reasoning, or language apprehension is unreliable because it is a product of natural selection. So why should ethics be any different? The answer is that in the case of nonmoral faculties, there is a reason why accuracy should be selected for. Accurate nonevaluative beliefs are usually useful for attaining one's goals; therefore, if a conscious organism is

[18] On (d), see Michael Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), 145–47. On (e), see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 9. Jonathan Haidt has studied attitudes toward harmless, consensual incest, as well as other victimless alleged wrongs; see Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–34.

generally well-adapted, so that its desires are generally in line with what would promote its own reproductive fitness, then, as a rule, more accurate factual beliefs will increase its fitness. For instance, if one wants to avoid predators, then correct beliefs about where predators are located will benefit one.

However, this reasoning cannot be extended to values, even if a realm of objective values exists. If an organism has generally accurate nonevaluative beliefs, it cannot be assumed that, in general, its also having objectively correct values will increase its reproductive fitness. Rather, an organism's reproductive fitness would seem to be best promoted by its having values skewed in a certain direction: by the organism's taking its own reproductive success, or things normally correlated with one's own reproductive success, to be good, whether or not those things are objectively good. The crucial asymmetry is that nonevaluative beliefs typically function to help us select the correct means of achieving our goals, whereas evaluative beliefs typically influence what goals we seek. Natural selection could be expected to favor individuals whose goals are in line with the "goals" of evolution, and who take the correct means of achieving their goals.

For this reason, it would seem that if the values toward which natural selection biased us coincided with the objectively correct values, this would be sheer coincidence. Such a coincidence cannot reasonably be expected. We should assume, therefore, that to the extent that biology influences our ethical intuitions, it leads us away from the objective truth, if objective truth exists in this area.[19]

D. Personal biases

Finally, as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues, our moral intuitions may be biased by emotions and personal interests.[20] It is easy to see how our interests are affected by what evaluative propositions we and others accept. On the one hand, if I reject the moral significance of the distinction between killing and letting die, I may feel obliged to donate large amounts of money to the poor; if I accept that the interests of animals matter morally, I may feel obliged to give up some of my favorite foods. On the other hand, I stand to benefit from others' acceptance of the obligation to assist others (particularly if I am poor) and of the obligation to refrain from harming others. These facts may bias me toward certain evaluative conclusions and away from others.

Even when our personal interests are not at stake, moral issues can arouse strong emotions. Even those who never expect to be eligible for

[19] Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 252–54; Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma."

[20] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 195–204.

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capital punishment, and never expect to know anyone who is, may evince passionate opinions about the justice of capital punishment. Likewise, both pro- and anti-abortion forces evince strong emotions when it comes to the morality of abortion. Though these are extreme cases, emotional reactions to moral issues are common. Emotions are known to impair judgment with respect to (other) factual questions, so, assuming the truth of moral realism, it is prima facie reasonable to assume that emotions impair our moral judgment as well.

In a criminal trial, friends or family members of the accused would never be allowed to serve on the jury, nor would the defendant's enemies. We cannot be sure that their judgments would be compromised by their feelings about the accused, but the danger of this is great enough that it would be foolish to trust their judgments. Similarly, people who, for whatever reason, have strong feelings about the defendant's alleged crime would not be allowed to serve. Thus, a rape victim would be excused from jury service for a rape trial. Even though, in this case, the would-be juror's interests would not literally be at stake, her emotions could be expected to compromise her objectivity. Again, we do not know that this would occur, but the danger of it is strong enough to render us unjustified in relying on the judgment that such a person would render. In the same way, the moral skeptic argues, when we are emotional about moral issues or when our own interests are at stake, the danger that our intuitions will be biased is too great for us to be justified in relying on those intuitions, in the absence of independent corroboration.

Taken together, the arguments of Sections III.A through III.D suggest that a wide range of ethical intuitions are subject to distorting factors and should not be relied upon. Unless we can somehow separate the contaminated intuitions from the trustworthy ones, we will have no way of constructing a rational moral system, and moral skepticism will prevail.

IV. How to Build Castles on Sand: A Reply to the Skeptics

One possible reaction to the arguments of Section III is to give up on normative ethics, despairing of ever identifying sufficiently reliable intuitions on which to base an ethical system. Another reaction is to resolve simply to apply the traditional reflective methods of ethics very carefully, in the hope that they will weed out the worst biases and distortions in our ethical judgments. The latter reaction strikes me as overly complacent, while the former is overly defeatist. The arguments of Section III may show that we have a good deal less moral knowledge than is commonly supposed, but I see little plausibility in the suggestion that they show that no one knows whether Ted Bundy's murders were wrong.[21] An inter-

[21] Ted Bundy killed dozens of young women across the United States during the 1970s, becoming one of history's most notorious serial murderers.

mediate reaction is called for: the arguments of Section III motivate a shift in the methods of ethics, a shift that leaves us with some moral beliefs, but perhaps with a very different set from those that more traditional methods lead to.

Consider again Sharon Street's objection to the possibility of overcoming ethical biases through rational reflection:

> [I]f the fund of evaluative judgements with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence . . . all our reflection over the ages has really just been a process of assessing evaluative judgements that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark. And reflection of *this* kind isn't going to get one any closer to evaluative truth. . . .

This objection has force on a simple model of ethical reflection: Suppose we consider a single ethical intuition whose veracity is in question, and suppose (i) that our only method of evaluating it is to compare it with a single other ethical intuition, and (ii) that each other ethical intuition is equally suspect as the original intuition. In that case, it seems clear that no ethical progress will be made.

That simple model, however, is inadequate in at least two important ways. First, it fails to take account of the probative value of *coherence*, understood, as in the coherence theory of justification, in terms of mutual support relations and explanatory relations among a large set of believed propositions.[22] If suspect intuitions can be assessed in terms of a body of other ethical judgments, then—*even if most of the other ethical judgments are false*—it may be possible to make a reliable assessment. To see how this is possible, consider a simple analogy. Suppose a detective interviews six eyewitnesses to a robbery. All of them claim to have seen the robbers drive away in their getaway car. The detective interviews the witnesses separately, giving them no opportunity to confer with each other. Now suppose that two of the six witnesses agree that the getaway car had license plate number X78 41A, while the other four witnesses report four different license plate numbers. In this case, even though most of the witnesses are wrong, the detective could still conclude that the correct license plate number was probably X78 41A. The reason is, in essence, that it is extremely unlikely that even two witnesses would agree on a specific license plate number, in the absence of collusion, unless that number were

[22] According to the coherence theory of justification, a belief is justified, if at all, by virtue of the way it fits together with the rest of one's belief system. This "fitting together" is usually understood as a matter of supporting and being supported by other beliefs, being explainable in terms of one's other beliefs, and so on. See Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 93–101.

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correct.[23] In this example, the witnesses are less than 50 percent reliable—two-thirds of the witnesses report incorrect license plate numbers. Nevertheless, by relying on coherence—trusting the two witnesses whose answers agree with each other—one can attain a conclusion that is much more than 50 percent likely to be correct.

Analogously, suppose that only a third of our ethical intuitions were accurate, the others being skewed in various directions by various factors. We might nevertheless be able to identify the correct intuitions, since the correct intuitions would tend to cohere with each other, while the other two-thirds of our intuitions would generally fail to cohere either with the correct intuitions or with each other. If we found that the largest coherent subset of our intuitions comprised one-third of our intuitions, while there was no other coherent subset anywhere near as large, then we would be prima facie justified in regarding that largest coherent subset as roughly accurate. The point here is not that such a coherent set of intuitions would be guaranteed to be true or close to the truth. Rather, the point is that, *pace* Sharon Street, even if our moral intuitions are unreliable taken singly, it does not follow that ethical reflection cannot produce conclusions that are highly likely to be true.

Second, and more importantly, it is a mistake to suppose that an ethical intuition can be criticized only by appeal to other ethical intuitions. Intuitionists who accept the is-ought gap (myself included) will grant that a *rebutting defeater* for an ethical intuition must derive from other ethical intuitions; however, an *undercutting defeater* for an ethical intuition may derive from nonevaluative premises.[24] A rebutting defeater for an ethical intuition is something that provides prima facie justification for denying the content of that intuition; that is, it justifies a contrary evaluative claim. Since intuitionists hold that all justification for evaluative claims derives ultimately from ethical intuition, a rebutting defeater for an ethical intuition must derive from other ethical intuitions. An undercutting defeater for an ethical intuition, however, need not provide justification for any evaluative claim; rather, an undercutting defeater simply constitutes

[23] The probability of as many as two of the six witnesses picking the same incorrect license plate number by chance (assuming random selection from six-digit alphanumeric sequences) is about one in 145 million.

This kind of argument is advanced by BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 147–48, and C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1946), 346. See Erik Olsson, *Against Coherence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), for an extended discussion of the conditions under which coherence produces confirmation. Note that the argument requires that the witnesses be more reliable than chance, but not that they be more than 50 percent reliable. Note also that I do not hereby embrace a coherence theory of justification, since I do not claim that coherence is either necessary or sufficient for justification; I claim only that coherence can ratchet up the level of justification that intuitions start with.

[24] See John Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 195–96, for the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters.

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grounds for doubting the reliability of the intuition in question. For example, suppose I have the intuition that incest is wrong. Suppose I then acquire good evidence that my intuition is a product of cultural or biological programming. This may function as an undercutting defeater, since it gives me a reason not to rely on my intuition that incest is wrong; however, it does not provide a rebutting defeater, since it gives me no evidence that incest is permissible.

The arguments of Section III provide prime examples of undercutting defeaters for some ethical beliefs. If the biases discussed there affected all intuitions equally, and produced distortions in random directions, then the biases would be difficult to correct for. But neither of those things is the case. In the case of each of the factors said to distort our ethical intuitions, intuitions would be expected to be skewed in a specific direction. As a corollary, not all intuitions are equally open to the accusation of bias. For instance, biological evolution would be expected to produce a bias toward favorable evaluations of things that promote one's own inclusive fitness; intuitions that do not imply favorable evaluations of things that promote one's own inclusive fitness are not candidates for being products of this particular bias. Similarly, cultural conditioning would be expected to produce a bias toward favorable evaluation of the practices of one's own culture; self-interest would produce a bias in favor of positive evaluations of oneself, one's own practices, or things that benefit oneself; and emotions would produce biases in favor of positive evaluations of things that give one positive emotions, and negative evaluations of things that give one negative emotions. Ethical intuitions that do not conform to the relevant expectations are not open to the charge of being produced by these biases.

When we put together the foregoing considerations, a cautious and critical intuitionist methodology emerges. While our ethical theory must be based on intuitions, we should not accept or reject an ethical principle solely on the basis of an uncritical appeal to a single intuition, nor should we assess an intuition's probative value solely in terms of its subjective strength. Rather, we should screen intuitions according to the following criteria:

(1) Seek a substantial body of ethical intuitions that fit together well, rather than placing great weight on any single intuition.
(2) Eschew intuitions that are not widely shared, that are specific to one's own culture, or that entail positive evaluations of the practices of one's own society and negative evaluations of the practices of other societies.
(3) Distrust intuitions that favor specific forms of behavior that would tend to promote reproductive fitness, particularly if these intuitions fail to cohere with other intuitions.

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(4) Distrust intuitions that differentially favor oneself, that is, that specially benefit or positively evaluate oneself, as opposed to others.
(5) Distrust intuitions that line up with strong emotions one has about the things evaluated.

If these precepts are followed in the construction of an ethical system, the resulting system will be exempt from the skeptical challenges of Section III.

To some degree, these methodological precepts are already being implemented. A prime example is Peter Singer's qualified defense of infanticide. After arguing that abortion is permissible because fetuses lack a right to life, Singer confronts the charge that his arguments lead to the permissibility of infanticide, since newborn infants would also lack a right to life on Singer's criteria. What is of interest here is not whether Singer's initial arguments regarding fetuses' alleged right to life succeed, but how he responds to the common intuition that infanticide is obviously unacceptable. Singer mentions three sources of bias with regard to the question of infanticide: First, "there are no doubt very good evolutionary reasons why we should instinctively feel protective" toward human babies. Second, we have emotions "based on the small, helpless, and—sometimes—cute appearance of human infants." Third, Singer observes that other societies and other moral philosophers—including such refined thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca—endorsed the killing of deformed infants. The suggestion here seems to be that our current horror at the thought of infanticide is a product of our particular culture.[25] For these three reasons, the intuition that infanticide is wrong is an especially strong candidate for being a product of bias. If an otherwise acceptable moral theory conflicts with that intuition, this should not be taken as a strong reason for rejecting the theory. I take it that this is essentially Singer's point.[26]

Nevertheless, Singer's way of reasoning in this passage is not typical of the tradition of Western philosophical ethics. Much more common are relatively uncritical appeals to intuition. When ethical intuitions conflict, alternative resolutions are typically assessed purely in terms of the number and strength of the intuitions each resolution can accommodate. The lessons of the skeptics regarding the unreliability of certain kinds of intuitions are rarely heeded, and were almost never heeded prior to the twentieth century. To this extent, revisionary intuitionism represents a new approach to normative ethics.

[25] Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 170–73.

[26] Presumably, Singer would not back this point up, as I would, with a realist conception of ethics, since his sympathies lie more in line with noncognitivism. I discuss the resulting tension between his metaethical views and his ethical methodology in my "Singer's Unstable Metaethics."

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V. Abstract, Concrete, and Formal Intuitions

We have just seen that the intuitionist's most natural response to the skeptical challenges of Section III is to attempt to distinguish those intuitions that are most likely to be reliable from those that are less likely to be reliable, and to base her ethical theory on intuitions of the former kind. This casts new light on a long-standing dispute among intuitionists concerning which kind of intuitions should be given most weight or should play the greatest role in the forming of our ethical beliefs. Each of the following types of intuitions has had its defenders:[27]

(1) *Concrete intuitions:* These are intuitions about specific situations, such as the intuition that in Singer's Shallow Pond example, one is obligated to rescue the drowning child, or that in the Trolley Car problem, one should turn the trolley away from the five bystanders toward the one.[28]
(2) *Abstract theoretical intuitions:* These are intuitions about very general principles, such as the intuition that the right action is always the action that has the best overall consequences, or that it is wrong to treat individuals as mere means.
(3) *Mid-level intuitions:* These are intuitions about principles of an intermediate degree of generality, such as the principle that, other things being equal, one ought to keep one's promises; that one ought to show gratitude for favors done to one; or that it is more important to avoid harming others than it is to positively help others.

Initially, it is unclear why preference should be given to any of these types of intuitions over the others. What does level of generality have to do with how likely an intuition is to be correct?[29] As I shall argue in this section, level of generality matters because intuitions of different levels of generality differ in their susceptibility to various kinds of error. When we take this into account, the effort to accommodate the challenges of the skeptics naturally leads one, for the most part, to prefer certain kinds of abstract theoretical intuitions over concrete and mid-level intuitions.

Concrete and mid-level intuitions are particularly susceptible to the kinds of biases discussed in Section III. One reason for this is that we typically have stronger emotions about concrete cases and mid-level

[27] See, respectively, Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981); and Ross, *The Right and the Good*.

[28] In this example, one must choose between allowing a runaway trolley to run over and kill five people, and flipping a switch to send the trolley onto another track, where it will run over and kill one person. See Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect," *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5–15.

[29] DePaul expresses doubt on this score in "The Problem of the Criterion and Coherence Methods in Ethics."

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generalizations than about very abstract principles. Compare the emotional impact of the statement "Killing deformed human infants is acceptable" to that of the statement "A being has a right to *x* only if that being is capable of desiring *x*."[30] The latter, abstract principle is much less susceptible to emotionally-based bias. In addition, concrete intuitions are more likely to be influenced by biological programming, because the biases with which evolution is most likely to have endowed us are biases favoring relatively specific forms of behavior that would have promoted our ancestors' inclusive fitness. Biological evolution is unlikely to have endowed us with biases toward embracing very abstract principles, since our biological ancestors probably engaged in little abstract reasoning. For instance, attitudes toward incest, human offspring, and social hierarchies are more likely to be influenced by biology than are intuitions about principles of additivity in axiology.[31] Finally, culturally generated biases are more likely to affect concrete and mid-level judgments than highly general ethical judgments, because our culture has a complex set of relatively specific rules—rules governing who is allowed to marry whom, how one should greet a stranger, how one should interact with one's boss, and so on. What rules, if any, our society accepts on the most abstract level is extremely unclear. Does our culture endorse the Categorical Imperative? What general criterion of rights does it endorse? The obscurity of the answers to these questions prevents cultural conditioning from directly determining our intuitions about the Categorical Imperative or the general criterion of rights. In contrast, it is perfectly clear how our culture might bias judgments about, for example, the acceptability of polygamy.

Abstract theoretical intuitions, in contrast, are prone to the simple but widespread problem of overgeneralization. This is the tendency to judge the truth of a generalization in terms of typical cases, or the sorts of cases that are easy to think of. Confronted with the generalization that all A's are B, one will have a tendency to judge the generalization true if all *typical* A's are B, even if some A's of a sort that do not readily come to mind are not B.[32] For example, the following generalization seems initially plausible:

(C) For any events *x* and *y*, if *x* was the cause of *y*, then if *x* had not occurred, *y* would not have occurred.

[30] Michael Tooley employs the latter principle in his defense of abortion and infanticide; see Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37–65.

[31] Axiological additivity principles claim that value can be added along some dimension—for example, that the value of a pair of people's lives is equal to the value of the first person's life plus the value of the second person's life; or that the value of some event is equal to the value of the first half of the event plus the value of the second half of the event.

[32] This is a special case of the "availability heuristic," discussed in Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 163–78.

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But now consider the following case:

> *The Preemption Case:* Two mob assassins, Lefty and Righty, have been hired to assassinate FBI informant Stoolie. As it happens, both of them get Stoolie in their sights at about the same time, and both fire their rifles. Either shot would be sufficient to kill Stoolie. Lefty's bullet, however, reaches Stoolie first; consequently, Lefty's shot is the one that actually causes Stoolie's death. However, if Lefty had not fired, Stoolie would still have died, because Righty's bullet would have killed him.

This shows that there can be a case in which x is the cause of y, but if x had not occurred, y would still have occurred.[33] Notice that, before we consider the Preemption Case, claim (C) seems plausible; but after we consider the Preemption Case, (C) no longer seems plausible. In fact, the history of analytic philosophy is littered with examples of generalizations that initially seem true, until one is confronted with recherché counterexamples. In these cases, the generalization loses its intuitive appeal as soon as the counterexample is discovered; its appeal depended upon our having only certain typical kinds of cases in mind. Because of this, even when no counterexample has yet been devised, most generalizations rightly occasion a lingering suspicion that a clear counterexample may be just waiting to be discovered.

Mid-level generalizations appear to give us the worst of both worlds: they are sufficiently concrete to be susceptible to biases with an emotional, cultural, or biological source, while at the same time they are sufficiently general to be susceptible to overgeneralization. For instance, the belief that adultery is wrong is open to the suspicion of being partly a product of emotional, cultural, and/or biological bias. At the same time, it is a sufficiently general claim that one may evaluate it by thinking of typical cases, perhaps overlooking some atypical cases of adultery. The latter problem, that of possible overgeneralization, may be remedied by adding a qualifier to the principle, resulting in a claim such as "Adultery is prima facie wrong" or "Adultery is wrong in typical cases." This does, however, have the disadvantage of rendering the principle less useful, since the principle does not tell us in which atypical cases, if any, adultery is not wrong all things considered.

All three types of intuitions, then, have their own problems. This does not mean that no intuitions can be relied upon. What it means is that we must consider more than an intuition's level of generality. As I indicated in Section IV, we must consider an intuition's content to determine whether it is a plausible candidate for being a product of one of the common types of biases discussed in Section III. In addition to this, however, there is a

[33] David Lewis discusses this kind of case in "Causation," in Lewis, *Philosophical Papers,* vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 159–214.

particular species of abstract ethical intuitions that seems to me to be unusually trustworthy. These are what I call "formal intuitions"—intuitions that impose formal constraints on ethical theories, though they do not themselves positively or negatively evaluate anything. The following are examples of such formal ethical intuitions:

(1) If *x* is better than *y* and *y* is better than *z*, then *x* is better than *z*.
(2) If *x* and *y* are qualitatively identical in nonevaluative respects, then *x* and *y* are also morally indistinguishable.
(3) If it is permissible to do *x*, and it is permissible to do *y* given that one does *x*, then it is permissible to do both *x* and *y*.
(4) If it is wrong to do *x*, and it is wrong to do *y*, then it is wrong to do both *x* and *y*.
(5) If two states of affairs, *x* and *y*, are so related that *y* can be produced by adding something valuable to *x*, without creating anything bad, lowering the value of anything in *x*, or removing anything of value from *x*, then *y* is better than *x*.
(6) The ethical status (whether permissible, wrong, obligatory, etc.) of choosing (*x* and *y*) over (*x* and *z*) is the same as that of choosing *y* over *z*, given the knowledge that *x* exists/occurs.

These kinds of intuitions are particularly plausible candidates for being products of rational reflection. They are not plausibly regarded as products of emotional bias, cultural or biological programming, or self-interested bias.

What of the threat of overgeneralization? It seems to me that these principles are not the result merely of considering some typical kinds of cases and then evaluating just those cases. Rather, we seem to be able to see why each of these things must be true in general; these principles seem to be required by the nature of the "better than" relation, the nature of permissibility, the nature of ethical evaluation, etc. Accordingly, if someone were to describe a proposed counterexample to one of these principles, our reaction would not be (as with the Preemption Case discussed above) to simply give up the principle in question without protest; rather, our reaction would probably be to call the case a "paradox." For example, consider the following series of cases, derived from an essay by Stuart Rachels:[34]

Case 1: You have a year of the most intense ecstasy imaginable.
Case 2: You have two years of slightly less intense pleasure.
Case 3: You have four years of pleasure slightly less intense than in Case 2. . . .

[34] Stuart Rachels, "Counterexamples to the Transitivity of *Better Than*," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1998): 71–83. Rachels takes his series of cases to provide a counterexample to the transitivity principle. I take it, instead, to illustrate certain biases in our evaluations of the cases.

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If we continue in this way for many more stages, eventually we arrive at:

Case N: You have millions and millions of years of barely noticeable pleasure.

In each succeeding case, you get a slightly less intense pleasure than the previous case, but it lasts for twice as long. Most people have the intuition that each case in the series is better than the previous one; for example, it is better to have two years of great pleasure, than it is to have only one year of slightly greater pleasure. However, most also have the intuition that the final case, in which one gets millions of years of barely noticeable pleasure, is *not* better than the first case. This seems paradoxical. In contrast, however, the Preemption Case discussed earlier does not strike anyone as "paradoxical"; rather, we simply accept it straightaway as a counterexample to claim (C), that if *x* caused *y*, then if *x* hadn't occurred, *y* wouldn't have occurred. I think this difference is explained by the fact that, whereas the intuition supporting claim (C) is a result of merely considering some typical cases of causation, the intuition supporting the principle of the transitivity of "better than" is a result of an insight into the nature of the "better than" relation as such.

It seems to me, then, that formal ethical intuitions should be given special weight in moral reasoning. These formal intuitions are not sufficient to generate any substantive ethical system. Nevertheless, they rule out some otherwise attractive (combinations of) ethical views and are for that reason useful in resolving some ethical disputes.[35]

VI. How Ethical Revision Is Possible

The dominant antirealist approaches in contemporary metaethics cannot support a revisionary ethical theory. Moral nihilism, of course, supports a sort of ethical revisionism, but its revisionism is too total: it rejects *all* first-order ethical theories.[36] Cultural relativism, in contrast, requires one to accept the norms of one's own society. At most a small amount of ethical revision is possible, in the event that some of the social norms are inconsistent, but the goal of ethical theorizing must nevertheless be to find the consistent ethical system that is closest to the prevailing social

[35] See my "Non-Egalitarianism," *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003): 147–71, for an argument against welfare egalitarianism based mainly on formal intuitions. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 419–30, for an argument (though Parfit does not endorse the argument) based mainly on formal intuitions for "the repugnant conclusion" that, for any world of very happy people, some world with a much larger population of people with lives barely worth living would be better. See also Unger, *Living High and Letting Die,* 88–94, for an argument that our intuitions about sacrificing individuals to produce greater benefit violate the principle of independence of irrelevant alternatives.

[36] Mackie, *Ethics,* 30–35.

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norms.[37] Subjectivism and noncognitivism would both have one accept the consistent ethical system that is closest to what one's own attitudes, desires, and/or feelings would support. While this might lead to an unconventional morality in the case of atypical individuals, it cannot lead to a substantial revision of one's own moral attitudes, and for most people it will result in an endorsement of something very close to conventional morality.

What these antirealist approaches lack is the notion that some of our (or our society's) ethical attitudes may be biases—illegitimate influences on our ethical thinking that lead us away from the moral truth—since, for antirealists, there is no moral truth independent of our attitudes. It is this notion of bias that allows intuitionists to select out different classes of intuitions for different treatment: the intuitions that are most subject to bias are to be discounted, while those that are most clearly products of intellectual reflection are to be preserved as a basis for ethical theory. Depending on how prevalent ethical biases are, this can lead to a significant revision of common-sense morality.

What areas are most ripe for ethical revision? The area of sexual morality is probably the clearest case, since it is an area in which common moral attitudes exhibit multiple signs of unreliability. First, people tend to have strong feelings about such things as homosexuality, bestiality, or polygamy. Second, on many issues of sexual conduct, we tend to have attitudes that conform to parochial cultural mores. For instance, attitudes toward prostitution, homosexuality, and polygamy in contemporary America are much harsher than those prevalent, respectively, in modern Japan, ancient Greece, or Imperial China—suggesting that most Americans' attitudes toward these practices are determined more by the time and place in which they happened to be born than by any objective ethical truths. Third, many of our attitudes in this area that are not culturally specific are subject to sociobiological explanations. Our feelings about incest and about female sexual promiscuity are cases in point. For these reasons, conventional sexual morality should probably be rejected more or less wholesale, excepting those aspects that are mere applications to sexual behavior of general principles of benevolence and respect for others. Traditional moral proscriptions against activities between consenting adults—including homosexuality, various forms of "unnatural" sexual activity, polygamy, and incest—are probably unjustifiable prejudices. In each case, of course, specific arguments put forward by the advocates of such proscriptions must be examined. The important point here is that one's initial, intuitive opposition to those arrangements or forms of sexual activity ought not to be treated as serious evidence of their wrongness.

[37] See Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 94–95. However, I argue in *Ethical Intuitionism* (176–79) that even demands for consistency and coherence are problematic for ethical antirealists.

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A more philosophically challenging area is that of the dispute between consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics. There is little doubt that common-sense morality is deontological. More specifically, there are many cases in which we regard it as wrong to sacrifice an individual for the greater benefit of others. Yet these ethical beliefs may require revision in the light of ethical argument. Consider the following relatively weak deontological principle:

> (WD) There is a way of harming people, which we may call "deontically constrained harming," such that it is wrong to harm a person in that way, even to produce a slightly greater benefit for others.

For example, suppose that I am driving two people to the hospital. In order to get them there in time to save their lives, I will have to run over and kill a single child who is playing in the street. (There is no time to move the child.) Most people have the intuition that, even though doing so would result in a lesser loss overall, it is impermissible to run over the child. It is this sort of intuition that motivates Weak Deontology.

WD is a modest deontological principle, compatible with a wide range of nonconsequentialist views. WD leaves open, for example, that there *may* be more extreme cases in which running over the child is justified—for instance, perhaps I might run over the child if doing so were necessary to get to a nuclear bomb set to blow up New York City in time to disarm it. In other words, though harming the child in this way to produce a slightly greater benefit (two lives saved) is impermissible, WD allows that harming the child in this way to produce a vastly greater benefit may be permissible. WD also leaves room for different ways of specifying what is the relevant way of harming others. This "way of harming others" may be defined in part by the kind of harm produced, by the circumstances in which it occurs, or even by the intentions of the agent.

To see why even this very weak form of deontology may require revision, imagine a situation in which I have two actions available, A_1 and A_2, where I can perform either action singly, perform both actions, or perform neither action. Each action will affect just two people, P_1 and P_2. Action A_1 will have the effect of harming P_1 while producing a greater benefit for P_2. Action A_2 will harm P_2 while producing a greater benefit for P_1. If, however, I perform both actions, the net effect will be a benefit for both P_1 and P_2:

Action	*Effect on P_1's Utility*	*Effect on P_2's Utility*
A_1	−1	+2
A_2	+2	−1
(A_1+A_2)	+1	+1

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It seems that, in addition to what we have stipulated so far, it is possible that the harms produced by each of A_1 and A_2 might be of the deontically constrained kind. If so, then WD implies that A_1 is impermissible and A_2 is impermissible. Yet it does not seem that (A_1+A_2)—the "conjunctive action" of performing both A_1 and A_2—is impermissible, for (A_1+A_2) benefits both P_1 and P_2 while harming no one.

There are a number of ways a Weak Deontologist might respond to this situation. One might respond by denying the plausible formal constraint that, if it is wrong to do *x* and it is wrong to do *y*, then it is wrong to do both *x* and *y*. Or one might argue that it *is* wrong to do both A_1 and A_2 in the situation described. Or one might try to delineate the class of deontically constrained harms in such a way that the sort of scenario envisioned becomes impossible (for instance, perhaps because A_2 ceases to be a deontically constrained harm in a situation in which A_1 is also performed). Each of these approaches merits further study, which must await another occasion.[38] My purpose here is simply to illustrate in principle how a revision of a major tenet of common-sense morality could be justified within an intuitionist framework. Suppose it turns out that the intuitions motivating Weak Deontology support an account of deontically constrained harms that makes the sort of scenario I have described possible, so that each of A_1 and A_2 would be judged wrong, independently of whether the other is performed. Suppose also that this intuitively supported account implies that an action such as (A_1+A_2), *if* we recognize such conjunctive actions, would *not* impose any deontically constrained harm. Then a consequentialist intuitionist would be in a position to argue that our Weak Deontological intuitions should be rejected, since they lead to a conflict with plausible formal ethical constraints. One plausible formal constraint is that if it is wrong to do *x* and it is wrong to do *y* given that one does *x*, then it must be wrong to do both *x* and *y*. Another plausible formal constraint is that the moral acceptability of a form of behavior should not be made to depend on one's method of individuating actions (for instance, on whether some bit of behavior counts as one action or two).

Our concrete and mid-level deontological intuitions conflict with the abstract, theoretical intuitions of many philosophers, which are consequentialist in nature. In addition, it seems likely that consequentialist ethical theories will have desirable formal properties that the main forms of deontology worth considering lack. If so, the best resolution may well be in favor of consequentialism, despite the fact that this entails a rejection of many widespread and salient ethical intuitions. Whether this is, in fact, the best resolution will depend on the results of future ethical investigation—so far, I have merely supposed hypothetically that things turn out in the way I would consider favorable to consequentialism.

[38] I discuss the issue in greater detail in my "A Paradox for Moderate Deontology" (unpublished manuscript).

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VII. Conclusion

The question of methodology in ethics has hitherto received too little attention. Nonintuitionists have made little effort to draw out the methodological implications of their metaethical theories, while intuitionists have done little more than enjoin us to rely upon our ethical intuition. Though intuitionists have often expressed preferences for one sort of intuition—abstract intuitions, concrete intuitions, or mid-level intuitions—over others, these have appeared as little more than personal preferences. Yet the field of ethics is surely in need of methodological scrutiny. There are few conclusions that can be held up as established results of ethics, and there are few nontrivial arguments in the field that are generally accepted as sound. Skeptics suggest that perhaps there is no ethical knowledge, that our moral beliefs are largely prejudices that cannot be relied upon. Furthermore, even among nonskeptical philosophers, radically different conceptions of the nature of the ethical enterprise abound. It would be surprising if these fundamental differences entailed no significant differences in how one should approach first-order ethical questions. For all these reasons, it seems especially important to attend to the question of how in general one should proceed in ethics.

Perhaps the most common approach to normative ethics is a kind of narrow reflective equilibrium: a variety of ethical intuitions or judgments are canvassed; in cases of conflict, they are weighed against one another on the basis of the strength of our initial inclination to accept them; and adjustments are made in an effort to produce a coherent ethical system with the least revision possible. Often, for example, an ethical theory is criticized by appeal to cases in which the theory can be shown to conflict with relatively strong moral intuitions; since our intuitions about the cases are stronger than our initial inclination to accept the moral theory, it is urged that we should reject the theory. This method may be expected to lead to something like W. D. Ross's pluralistic system of prima facie duties.

This method, as I have urged, is oversimplified. The key point in a properly critical intuitionist methodology is that not all intuitions are created equal. Intuitions that are controversial or that may easily be explained as products of bias have relatively little evidential value. Intuitions that are widely shared and are not plausible candidates for being mere prejudices have much greater evidential value. Among this latter class, there are a number of formal ethical intuitions—which do not entail any specific evaluations but which place constraints on systems of evaluations—that are particularly strong candidates for being products of intellectual reflection rather than bias.

The preferential treatment I have advocated for certain kinds of intuitions paves the way for a degree of ethical revisionism not otherwise possible. How far such revision should go remains an open question.

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Almost certainly, for example, the correct view of sexual morality is highly revisionary. It is less clear whether the correct views on such matters as justice and individual rights are similarly revisionary. Nevertheless, the critical intuitionism I have advocated probably holds out the best hope for advocates of revisionary ethical theories, such as utilitarianism or ethical egoism.

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