

# An analysis of the reasons why moral intuition cannot be fully trusted in moral judgment

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## Abstract:

Moral intuition is an individual's moral choice and evaluation based on subconscious moral standards when facing moral situations without relying on empirical evidence and logical reasoning. This article starts with the definition of moral intuition and analyzes whether moral intuition is reliable in the process of moral judgment. The article starts with moral judgment in the moral ambiguity zone and finds that moral judgments based on moral intuition are unreliable in moral dilemmas. Secondly, the article further analyzes the variability of moral standards and explains that moral judgments based on moral intuition may lead to retrospective moral conflicts and regrets after changes in moral standards. Finally, the article further points out that moral intuition is easily influenced by external pressure, which will further affect the effectiveness of moral intuition in moral situational judgment. In summary, the article concludes that pure moral intuition is not worthy of full trust, and a comprehensive judgment of rational analysis and moral intuition can better help us make judgments about moral situations.

**Keywords:** moral intuition; moral judgement; moral standards.

## 1. Introduction

Imagine a scenario in which an onlooker has the choice to save five people in the face of death caused by being hit by a trolley by diverting the trolley to kill just one person. If you are the onlooker in question, what choice would you make? When a trolley is about to come, it would be rather understandable if one finds it difficult to choose to pull the rod or not. This is the well-known puzzle that has become a worldwide controversial problem, the so-called Trolley Problem, since it was proposed eighty years ago<sup>[1]</sup>. In this scenario, the unconscious thought that pops into one's head is usually understood as moral intuition. This leads to a problem: Do we have any good reasons to trust our moral intuition? This essay argues that considering the changing moral standards and conflicting moral judgments, it would be difficult to guarantee that we always have good reasons to trust our moral intuition.

## 2. Definition of moral intuition

Moral intuition is an individual's moral choice and evaluation based on subconscious moral standards when facing moral situations without relying on empirical evidence and logical reasoning. The term moral intuition has been applied to the field of intuitionism in the 17th century<sup>[2]</sup>. "Morality," defined as a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behavior and character, implies a reasoned

and principled approach to ethical decision-making. In terms of "intuition," it refers to the ability to comprehend or make a judgment immediately based on one's instant feelings instead of facts or thoughts, thus suggesting an automatic or subconscious process<sup>[3]</sup>. This leads to a paradox: Morality is the deliberate, rational approach, while intuition is spontaneous and instinctive, and the words morality and intuition are inherently contradictory. This contradiction raises questions about the reliability and validity of moral intuitions since instantaneous judgment based on subjective internal knowledge could be irresponsible and biased<sup>[4]</sup>. According to Cecchini, agents accept moral intuitions proportionally to their confidence level, and intuitive confidence is epistemically reliable<sup>[5]</sup>. Whereas there is consistent evidence for the first hypothesis proposed by Cecchini, the moral intuition that people generate in a moment is purely based on erratic self-awareness.

It can be seen that the self-contradiction of this term might imply its untrustworthy nature. By using the term moral intuition, we seem to imply that moral intuition arises spontaneously and unconsciously without the need for reasoned reflection or adherence to moral principles. However, when facing these ethical controversies, the decisions we make out of moral intuitions are moral judgments, which refer to a decision about what is right and what is wrong, usually made in a morally problematic

situation<sup>[6]</sup>. In reality, the concept of morality and the ideology of morality are deeply rooted in and shaped by the consistently changing society of human beings' "imagined community"<sup>[7]</sup>. This means that our present-day moral intuitions are closely related to moral standards, cognitions, and judgments, which are the result of collective memories, social experience, and intellectual insight developed in the society of human beings. In this sense, the so-called moral intuition could be understood as reflective deliberation and as a part of a coping mechanism in the face of moral dilemmas.

### 3. Moral intuition in the moral ambiguity zone

If we try to use moral intuition to make moral judgments about events, an important question is whether we can trust our moral intuition. This problem can be broken down into two levels. The first level is whether we believe opinions based on our moral intuitions. This conclusion is certain; if we use moral intuition as our judgment of things, then we undoubtedly trust our moral intuition. The second level is whether judgments based on moral intuition are good and appropriate. Will there be positive results? However, it is not absolute that a decision made out of one's moral intuition would guarantee a positive outcome, and thus, moral intuition might not be trustworthy. In most cases, moral judgments generated by moral intuition are trustworthy, such as theft, robbery, etc. However, using moral intuition to guide moral judgment can lead to moral dilemmas in certain areas of moral ambiguity. In these scenarios, the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the events with ethical controversies determine the untrustworthiness of one's moral intuition applied in usually controversial moral dilemmas. In the trolley problem, a utilitarian view asserts that it is obligatory to steer to the track with one man on it. According to classical utilitarianism, such a decision would be permissible and morally a better option, too<sup>[8]</sup>. An alternative viewpoint is that since moral wrongs are already in place in the situation, moving to another track constitutes participation in the moral wrong, making one partially responsible for death when otherwise no one would be responsible.<sup>[9]</sup> Therefore, in the trolley dilemma, it is unclear whether running someone over to minimize the damage is morally justifiable or if ignoring the situation entirely is the right course of action. Also, whether inaction constitutes non-intervention or a deliberate sentencing of death for those five people remains elusive. There could exist two reasonable but conflicting choices for the same problem, and therefore, any choice made out of one's moral intuition could be viewed as unreasonable by one's counterpart with the

opposite choice. Therefore, one would easily conclude that one's counterpart does not have any good reasons to trust his or her moral intuition because it is not morally acceptable in a specific standard, and vice versa.

### 4. The variability of moral intuition

Moral intuition is an individual's moral choice and evaluation based on subconscious moral standards when facing moral situations without relying on empirical evidence and logical reasoning. Based on different moral standards, the same moral situation may generate different moral intuitions. The variability of moral standards and moral intuition is another reason why moral intuition is untrustworthy. Heavily critical of traditional moral values, Nietzsche points out how they change according to time, often based on interests and different societal power arrangements, and are far from being right or proper in themselves. He claimed in his works, but more so in "On the Genealogy of Morality," that what people consider moral is very contingent on historical and cultural context [10]. He introduced the concepts of "master morality" and "slave morality," saying that ethical values are contingent on social and political dynamics<sup>[10]</sup>. The values of master morality emanate from traits such as strength and nobility, while those of slave morality originate in resentment. The credibility of these concepts will be questioned as an individual's moral intuition or judgment may be manipulated and rooted in social norms. Because in a society, the collective moral standards recognized by the public may change over time.

If we define "trust our moral intuitions" as "trust that our moral intuition now and perhaps forever," and we assume that moral standards and thereby moral intuitions change over time, they are static at one point or another; then we might trust moral intuitions in these moments. When our moral intuition does align with moral standards, such alignment might enhance our trust in moral intuition. However, if moral standards change in the future, thereby making our moral intuition wrong, such change might lead to the untrustworthiness of moral intuition.

After decisions have been made, individuals might regret the decisions that they made based on the previous version of moral standards when they no longer apply to the changing social conditions. As the context of ethical decision-making does not always align with evolving social standards, this might lead to retrospective moral conflict and regret. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance<sup>[11]</sup>, when people realize their past moral decisions conflict with the current social standards, they feel discomfort. In order to reduce this discomfort, individuals may either change their beliefs or behaviors to align

with the group or rationalize their actions to reduce the perceived inconsistency. Sometimes, they tend to redefine their past actions as immoral and deny the correctness of their previous choices. In this context, participants in Milgram's social conformity experiment might realize that there is no good reason to trust their then moral intuitions.

### 5. The external power's impact on moral intuition

The emergence of moral intuition is sometimes not entirely a reflection of personal moral standards and value judgments, as external forces such as the social environment may largely alter an individual's moral intuition. One example that would enable us to have better responses to these questions would be Milgram's social conformity experiment. In this experiment, when an experimenter told participants to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks to another individual, they may have undergone cognitive dissonance between their belief in not harming others (moral standards) and their obedience to authority (action) <sup>[12]</sup>. To diminish this dissonance, they might persuade themselves that obeying authority is the right thing to do, even convince themselves to alter their moral intuition. It can be seen that, at the beginning of decision-making, perhaps out of social conformity, individuals may feel pressured to align their beliefs or behaviors with the mainstream moral standard of the society that they live in, even if they conflict with their own values or beliefs. In reality, even if individuals realize they might act in ways that contradict their own beliefs or values, they might still submit to social pressure and follow their moral intuition under that circumstance. In this experiment, although participants "trust" their moral intuition, whether they have "good reasons" to trust would be controversial.

Furthermore, the moral institution regarding the traditional trolley problem would be affected. An example would be the Fat Man issue <sup>[12]</sup>. In this specific scenario, when the trolley is about to go underneath a bridge and kill the five tied to the track, one could save their lives by pushing over a fat man whose death will stop the oncoming trolley. It is noteworthy that scholars have pointed out that those who face the same moral dilemma tend to have different tendencies; those in the original Trolley Problem tend to choose to pull over the switch and kill one person tend not to do so in the face of the Fat man issue <sup>[12]</sup>. The reason behind these different choices might be their reaction to the moral pressure caused by different conditions in the very same setting. The new conditions in the Fat Man issue trigger stronger moral objections among the decision-makers and thus make them arouse different moral intuitions in the same situation. This is perhaps because

the word "pushover" might imply a certain responsibility towards the death of the specific "fat man" in question, thus leaving the decision makers more moral pressure compared with pulling a lever to divert the trolley. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the trustworthiness of the so-called moral intuition might be questioned in the Trolley Problem, as well as other dilemmas.

### 6. The conclusion

While intuition usually refers to immediate reactions, morality is deeply rooted in personal values and beliefs. The trustworthiness of this self-contradicting concept would not be reliable and should be questioned. Meanwhile, Due to humans' different reactions when facing moral dilemmas, it might be unreasonable to consider one moral intuition always reliable; it disregards the validity of alternative choices, denying the complexity of moral decision-making. Finally, moral standards are constantly changing, which brings uncertainty to the judgment of moral dilemmas, leading people to question or deny the credibility of their moral intuitions.

In short, although moral intuition can help us quickly respond to moral situations in a certain sense, this response is not necessarily reliable. When faced with complex moral situations, a more rational analysis rather than relying solely on moral intuition for judgment can help us better face complex societies.

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