# THE Moral Intuitions in Moral Decision-Making

## Jinzhu Hao

Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, 210022, China;

**Abstract:**

Moral intuitions are strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs. Scholars have put forward many theories about the origin of moral intuition from different perspectives. Based on many scholars' theoretical analysis of moral intuition, this paper takes Kant's moral philosophy as the basic framework. It further introduces caring ethics and utilitarianism as supplements to analyze the role of moral intuition in moral decision-making. This essay argues that while moral intuitions can serve as valuable initial guides, they must be critically examined and refined through a Kantian framework that integrates the categorical imperative with reasoned emotions and utilitarianism, enhancing their trustworthiness by aligning them with rational moral principles.

**Keywords:** Moral Intuition; Moral Decision-Making; Kantian ethics; Care Ethics; Utilitarianism.

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 1945, J. Robert Oppenheimer faced a profound ethical dilemma. As the scientific leader of the Manhattan Project, he had spearheaded the development of the atomic bomb, a weapon capable of unprecedented destruction as strategic deterrence against Nazi Germany. He quoted the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." (Smith & Weiner, 1980). This moment of moral reckoning highlights the inherent complexity of ethical decision-making and the role of moral intuitions. Moral intuitions are strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs. This essay argues that while moral intuitions can serve as valuable initial guides, they must be critically examined and refined through a Kantian framework that integrates the categorical imperative with reasoned emotions and utilitarianism, enhancing their trustworthiness by aligning them with rational moral principles.

## 2. Theoretical Research on Moral Intuition

Moral intuitions serve as the first responders to ethical dilemmas. Philosophically, they have been explored from various perspectives. David Hume (1965) viewed them as natural and essential to human morality, suggesting that reason is the slave of the passions. Daniel Kahneman (2011) viewed them as fast and automatic intuitive thinking (System 1) rather than slower and more deliberate reasoning (System 2) in his dual-process theory. An example is that people make inconsistent moral decisions when the scenarios are slightly changed. Most people would choose to divert the trolley to a track when it would have just killed one person instead of five (scenario 1), whereas most people would choose not to save the five people if this requires them to push a person onto the track to stop the trolly (scenario 2).

Immanuel Kant (1908) proposed that intuitions initiate moral contemplation. His categorical imperative, as a central tenet of his philosophy, demands that actions should be guided by maxims that can be universally applied. Regarding the trolley problem, Kantian perspective proposed the formula of Universal Law and the formula of humanity. The former refers to the fact that one should act only according to the maxim, which are principles all people agree to. The latter refers to the fact that one should treat humanity as an end and never merely as a means. Specifically, this means one should never use people (including oneself) to reach another goal. In scenarios one and two, the potential maxim is "In order to save more lives, I would pull a lever or push the someone to death." Kantian perspectives would argue that these maxims cannot be universalized and contradict the principle of seeing each person as an end in themselves.

Kant argued that true moral intuitions were produced by reason. Human differs from animals who act based on their desire and "will." For example, a person may choose to starve to death if they had to choose between food or betraying their friend. In this case, humans make moral decisions because of "good" will. However, a person may possess a relatively "evil" will and act immorally. In this case, the person would choose food over his/her friend due to the fear of death. For Kant, reason is the foundation of goodwill, and reason propels the progress of human society. Ancient scientists advanced medical development by studying human anatomy. Therefore, these scientists broke down superstitious beliefs that diseases were curses from supernatural forces, weakening the shackles of re-

ligious theocracy on human minds. Reason distinguishes humans from animals, allowing people not to be confined to primitive desires or fear and providing people with the capability of making choices that "realize a goodwill." Kant believed that through this rational law, one could generate moral judgments that reflected only good wills unrelated to any plans for personal benefit, which could be unconditional and absolute true "moral intuition."

However, the cognitive scientist and philosopher Jonathan Haidt (2001) posited that moral intuitions were shaped by evolutionary processes, which crafted moral intuitions more for survival within social groups than for discerning objective moral truths. Haidt argued that moral intuitions can provide valuable initial insights; however, these insights are susceptible to biases, cultural conditioning, and personal inclinations (Tobia, 2014). Without subjecting our moral intuitions to critical assessment, people risk straying from rational moral principles.

## 3. Kant's Theoretical Applications

Kant's theory can help to guide ethical decision-making. Taking the bias of in-group favoritism as an example, if a principle of favoring one's own group were universalized, it would lead to a fragmented society where mutual trust and cooperation are impossible. Also, individuals raised in a culture that prioritizes collectivist culture might intuitively downplay personal freedom; Kantian ethics would encourage this cohort to critically reflect on whether principles that restrict autonomy can be universally applied without contradiction.

Kantian perspective indicates that actions motivated by personal inclinations lack moral worth because they are contingent upon individual desires rather than rational principles. People should act from duty, ensuring reason rather than subjective inclinations guide them. Take events such as the epidemic that have a big impact on social order as an example. When the social order is in disorder due to the huge impact, only the moral intuition derived from rational reasoning can effectively unify the thought to promote the settlement of the chaos. Depending on the individual subjective tendency to judge, the tendency of different groups may lead to further division of society and further aggravate the degree of social chaos.

Kant's framework can also be applied in the era of AI. The recent fire and hire of the Open AI CEO Sam Altman has illuminated a significant moral debate about the direction of artificial intelligence (AI) development. Should we continue to develop AI like Altman champions rapidly, or should we follow the suggestions given by one of the AI development engineers, Ilya Sutskever, who advocates for a more cautious and safety-focused approach? Kantian perspective reveals a clear ethical preference for caution and safety. If everyone pursued rapid AI development for profit without sufficient safeguards, it would lead to a society where human dignity and moral worth are subordinated to economic benefits. Also, the development of AI must respect the intrinsic worth of humans by ensuring fairness, accountability, and transparency. For example, individuals may experience unemployment, privacy violations, and compromised personal autonomy if AI technologies are implemented without fully understanding their long-term impacts or ensuring robust safety measures.

## 4. The Promoting Role of Care Ethics and Utilitarianism in Moral Decision making

Kant emphasizes that moral values derive from responsibility to moral laws and thus denies the role of emotion (Kant, 1922). But in the real world, absolute reason is a very demanding condition for moral intuition. Care ethics, developed by Gilligan (1988), emphasizes the relational and emotional aspects of moral decision-making and focuses on the importance of empathy and the interdependence of individuals. This idea contrasts with Kant's emphasis on autonomy and rational duty. Care ethics highlights the significance of relationships and the responsibilities that arise from them. A strict Kantian approach to policy regarding World War II would be that some individuals sought to hide Jewish people from persecution, although this broke the law and jeopardized themselves. From a Kantian perspective, the maxim of breaking the law to protect innocent lives from genocide is morally unjustified (Bauman, 2000; MacAskill, 2013). Therefore, rather than overriding Kantian principles, consequence-focused reasoning is auxiliary to ethical discernment. Outcomes provide wisdom about best-applying universality and duty to complex contexts. However, supreme moral authority remains based on goodwill and categorical imperatives. This suggested that while Kant's thought provides a clear and principled approach to ethics, it can sometimes appear rigid in the face of real-world complexities.

However, both care ethics and Kantian ethics are insufficient to address the moral dilemma that Oppenheimer faced. Care ethics does not provide a mechanism for conflicting care, meaning people from the countries that suffered from the Nazis and the prevention of widespread destruction. Kantian ethics involves the conflict between the duty to protect one's country and the duty to respect and safeguard human life globally. Therefore, consequence-focused reasoning, particularly utilitarianism, should be crucial in moral decision-making (Benthan, 1978). Utilitarian reasoning supports Oppenheimer's decision, as dropping the bombs resulted in a quicker end to World War II, thereby saving more lives in the long run.

Similarly, utilitarian reasoning can be used to address the challenges that the government faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in balancing public health with

individual freedoms. Regarding whether to mandate vaccination for all citizens, some people are against this policy because a small percentage of the population may experience strong side effects, which can cause death. The maxim "It is acceptable to mandate vaccination to prevent the spread of a deadly disease" could be universalized without leading to contradictions in an ideal context, as a society where everyone is vaccinated against deadly diseases would likely be healthier and safer. However, in a pandemic context, whether to choose to respect the freedom and will of a small group of people or to protect the majority, particularly the vulnerable cohort, including the elderly and the children, became a dilemma. In this case, consequential reasoning should be introduced.

In ethical decision-making, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to integrate reasoned emotions with rational deliberation. Reflecting on Robert Oppenheimer's ethical dilemma during the Manhattan Project illustrates the importance of critically examining moral intuitions through empathetic motivation, which intends to end suffering and the recognition of global responsibilities aligned with care ethics. However, the Manhattan Project did not fully resolve the moral issues presented by the immediate consequences. The use of a weapon that caused indiscriminate destruction and massive civilian casualties contradicts the principles of universalizability and respect for human dignity. The critical evaluation underscores the need for a careful balance between rational duty, empathy, and the broader relational impact, ultimately revealing that the morality of Oppenheimer's actions remains deeply contested and ethically ambiguous.

Regarding the direction of artificial intelligence (AI) development, policymakers need to draw upon ethical theories to create balanced regulations. Kantian ethics, emphasizing respect for humans and universality, highlights the importance of the AI system's transparency and accountability (Binns, 2017). Care ethics emphasizes the importance of empathy, relationships, and the moral significance of caring for others. Regulations should promote the use of AI and make it accessible to everyone, especially to those who are vulnerable or marginalized, and ensure that AI technologies address their specific needs (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). Utilitarianism calls for maximizing overall happiness and minimizing harm. This means a robust framework for risk assessment and management, ensuring maximizing the benefits while minimizing the potential harms of AI.

## 5. Conclusion

In a rapidly changing world, the continuous emergence of new technologies such as AI is constantly changing the human living environment. Only by incorporating moral principles into policy implementation and technology development can we better guide technology development and policy promotion and promote the development of human civilization. Oppenheimer's ethical reflection is a powerful reminder of the importance of critical assessment in moral deliberation, guiding us toward a more principled and humane approach to the challenges of our time. Embracing a holistic ethical perspective helps people navigate the moral landscape of technology with integrity, ensuring that human advancements contribute to the greater good while safeguarding the dignity and rights of all individuals.

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