
Handout on Peter Singer's "Ethics and Intuitions"

I. The Problem: Should We Trust Our Moral Intuitions?

Peter Singer's paper engages a core methodological tension in normative ethics: **the role of intuitions in justifying moral theories**. A dominant strategy in moral philosophy, particularly in critiques of consequentialism, has been to challenge a theory by showing it violates our "common moral intuitions." Singer asks: *But what if these intuitions have evolutionary and neurological origins that undermine their normative authority?*

- **Central Question:** *Why should intuitions, shaped by evolutionary and emotional processes, serve as benchmarks for moral truth?*
 - **Singer's Thesis:** Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology provide strong reasons to **critically reassess the normative authority** of our intuitions. If these intuitions are **biologically contingent**, they may lack the justificatory force often granted to them in moral philosophy.
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II. Singer's Solution: A Naturalistic Critique of Intuitionism

Singer does not propose a new moral theory per se, but **undermines** the foundations of intuition-based methodologies like *reflective equilibrium* and *Kantian constructivism*.

III. Structure and Argument Overview

1. Historical Background and Evolutionary Insights (pp. 332–336)

- **Philosophers have long speculated** about morality's origins: Plato, Hume, Mencius, Hobbes, etc.
- **Pre-Darwinian limitation:** Though thinkers like Hume came close, they lacked an evolutionary framework for explaining why we feel moral obligations toward kin, friends, and reciprocators.

- **Singer's contribution:** Places these philosophical questions within the context of **evolutionary theory**.
 - Kin selection explains partiality to close relatives.
 - Reciprocal altruism explains cooperation.
 - Group selection (though controversial) explains some elements of justice and fairness.

Key claim: "Morality is a natural phenomenon. No myths are required to explain its existence." (p. 336)

2. Neuroscience and the Mechanisms of Moral Judgment (pp. 336–341)

- Singer reviews **Jonathan Haidt's experiments**, such as the "Julie and Mark incest" scenario:
 - Most respondents say the action is wrong but cannot explain why—a case of **moral dumbfounding**.
 - Suggests that **intuitions often precede and guide reasoning**, not the other way around.
 - **Phineas Gage and ventromedial damage:**
 - Gage's case and others like it show **intact reasoning** but **impaired moral behavior**, implying a deep link between **emotion and moral judgment**.
 - **Joshua Greene's fMRI studies** on trolley problems:
 - "Switch" vs. "footbridge" versions evoke **different brain regions**—emotional vs. cognitive.
 - Those who override emotional intuitions to accept the utilitarian option (e.g., push the man) show **longer reaction times** and greater **prefrontal cortex activity**.
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3. Normative Implications: What to Do with Intuitions? (pp. 342–349)

Singer confronts **reflective equilibrium** (Rawls) and **Kantian constructivism** head-on:

- **Reflective Equilibrium (RE):** A theory is good if it aligns with our "considered moral judgments."
 - Singer's critique: But *what if those judgments are unreliable products of evolutionary history?*
- **Kantian Constructivism:** Morality emerges from reasonable agreement based on our self-conception.
 - Singer: This self-conception is itself shaped by contingent moral intuitions.

Conclusion: Both RE and constructivism risk *enshrining bias and emotional residue* from our evolutionary past.

He prefers a “**wide reflective equilibrium**” approach (à la Norman Daniels), which *permits rejection of intuitions* when justified—but warns this may render RE **vacuous** if it becomes too permissive.

4. The Forward Path: Can We Ground Ethics in Reason Alone? (pp. 349–351)

- We face a **dilemma**:
 - **Either** accept that moral judgments are irreducibly emotional (and risk skepticism), **or** try to distinguish between **irrational evolved intuitions** and **rational intuitions**.
- Singer tentatively embraces the latter.
 - E.g., the judgment that "five deaths are worse than one" may not be emotional, but **rational**, akin to **Sidgwick's ethical axioms**.
 - “The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view of the Universe, than the good of any other.”