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Untitled

Mixed Media

My final project answered the question, “Can we trust our moral intuition?” In my research paper, I asserted that while we can use our moral intuition as a guide, we must supplement it with logical reasoning. Inspired by this nuanced perspective, I sought to submerge the viewers in the difficult experience of making moral decisions where there is often no one “right” outcome, or perhaps no desirable ones altogether. My sculpture represents the grayness of morality, the loneliness of moral decisions, and the fear of making the “wrong” choice. Having visited a Van Gogh exhibit a few years prior, I wanted to replicate the immersive feel of the projections through usage of mylar film and LED lights. Having never attempted a piece of such scale before, or even worked with many of the materials, I went into the process without a clear view of what I wanted the final piece to look like, and rather allowed myself to get inspired during the process. Embracing this challenge, I created a piece of work that invites viewers to reflect inwards on how they themselves make moral decisions.

# The Reliability of Moral Intuition in Ethical Judgements



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OS50

Morality is often conceived as the difference between right and wrong, the premise on which ethics is based, dictating society's view of actions. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy takes this definition a step further; it separates morality into two categories: a "certain [code] of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behavior" and "a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Definition of Morality"). To paraphrase, they define morality as one of the following: subjective or objective. If morality is the former, can we trust our moral intuition? And if it is the latter, what are those objective rules, and how do we know what they are? In this paper, I argue that morality is inherently subjective due to its biological and cultural origins, and hence, while we cannot entirely rely on our moral intuitions, we should strive to critically evaluate them and make the best informed decisions.

Before delving into the topic of human morality's reliability, it is imperative to first explore morality's origins to determine whether it is subjective or objective. Philosophers debate whether morality comes primarily from biological or cultural origins, but I assert that it is a combination of both. Regardless of morality's potential subjectivity or objectivity, the majority of society agree on a general code of rules (e.g. do not kill) that most individuals follow, with few exceptions (e.g. killing in self-defense). I will define this set of rules as Common Morality ("CM"). CM's roots lie in biological altruism, where humans or animals act altruistically towards one another. Although this altruistic behavior can detrimentally impact the individual who exhibits it (e.g. giving away their own food to save another starving individual), overall, the behavior increases the survival rate of the group, thereby perpetuating this behavior through genetic inheritance (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Biological Altruism"). This creates the CM most societies follow. However, some ethical intuitionists argue that the presence of CM

suggests the existence of an objective set of morals, wherein distinct “right” and “wrong” choices in different situations are directly apprehensible through human intuition with little to no inferential reasoning. However:

(P1) There exists subjective situations, such as ones where all possible actions result in negative outcomes (e.g. debates over abortion, which pivot on the dilemma between upholding women’s rights and protecting fetal life).

(P2) If ethical intuition were valid, then debates over subjective situations would not exist, as individuals would instinctively know the “right” decision through human intuition.

(P3) There are debates about subjective situations.

(C) Therefore, ethical intuition cannot serve as a universal, infallible guide to moral truth.

Culture and religion are also present in morality. For example, while polyamory could have biological advantages due to the potential increase in offspring from multiple relationships, it remains frowned upon due to cultural and religious reasons. Thus, while elements of CM may arise from biological tendencies, it does not signify an objective moral conduct; the interplay of cultural and religious norms complicates moral intuition, underscoring the fact that morality is not universally fixed but rather subjective.

If morality is subjective, how can we distinguish between right and wrong? Normative ethics, the philosophy behind morals, is divided into three main branches, each categorizing “right” and “wrong” in its own way: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. While each has its own merits, no one branch of normative ethics can objectively determine what is “right” and “wrong” in all situations. Consequentialism is focused primarily on the results, and what good comes out of them. Deontology is similar to ethical intuitionism wherein there is a clear set of moral rules, and breaking them is objectively bad. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, encourages

people to act as a virtuous person, dictating who a person should be rather than how they should act. For example, in a hypothetical scenario, you have captured an enemy agent who is planning on eradicating a city. The only way to stop him is by torturing him. A consequentialist would dictate that torturing the agent is the moral course of action, as it would effectively save many lives. A deontologist, on the other hand, would argue that we should let the city be bombed, as torture is objectively wrong, regardless of the situation. A virtue ethicist would fluctuate between both courses of actions, as they would be striving to be a virtuous person who would neither let the city be bombed nor torture a person, despite it being impossible to do neither. In such a moral dilemma, there is no objective “right” action; arguments could be made for either side. This highlights the subjectivity of determining what is moral, as what one society may deem virtuous, another may see as unethical.

Despite the absence of an objective “right” action, our moral intuition still leads us towards a certain behavior without apparent logical reason. Consider the classic trolley dilemma: a trolley is on course to kill five people, but pulling a lever would redirect it onto another track, sacrificing one person instead. The footbridge version is similar, except it involves directly pushing a large man from a footbridge to stop the trolley, thereby saving five lives at the cost of one. Intriguingly, although both scenarios present a choice of either killing one person or five, more individuals will pull the lever in the classic scenario, yet refuse to push the man onto the tracks in the footbridge scenario, even though the inaction would result in a greater loss of life. Dr. Greene, a psychology professor at Harvard University, conducted a study to observe participants’ responses to both trolley dilemmas under MRI scans. He revealed that each scenario activates different brain regions depending on the level of personal involvement. As pulling a lever is the more detached act, people tend to deem it as the “right” choice considering the net

gain of four lives. On the other hand, the direct action of pushing a man off the footbridge triggers intense emotional responses in the brain, possibly influenced by CM, causing a majority to resist taking such action. Many people are unable to vocalize why they find pushing a man off the footbridge unacceptable compared to pulling the lever in the classic trolley dilemma, proving that deeply ingrained moral intuitions influence our decisions in subconscious ways.

If our moral intuition leads us to refrain from pushing the man off the footbridge even though the inaction results in a greater number of deaths without any logical reason why, its reliability as a guide is questionable, and hence, it should not be relied on blindly and should be supplemented with inferential reasoning. As established earlier, morality is subjective; there exists no absolute “right” or “wrong”. Within the footbridge dilemma, the deontological perspective—which many might find agreeable—suggests that the act of killing is intrinsically wrong, and hence we should not push the man off the footbridge even if it results in the death of five others. However, others may agree with the consequentialism view, believing that as one man’s sacrifice would lead to the survival of five other people, the net gain of four lives would justify the grim decision. I assert that as morality is subjective, a balanced approach that involves heeding our moral intuition while also engaging in logical deliberation is the best course of action. After all, morality is inherently a construct shaped by societal consensus, which can shift over time. Historical injustices like slavery were once rationalized, reflecting the moral misjudgments of past societies. Hence, while our moral intuition may provide a scaffold for decision-making due to their basis in biological altruism, they should not be followed without scrutiny. Recall how Galileo’s contrarian stance on heliocentrism—defying the prevailing beliefs of his era and causing him to be jailed—precipitated numerous scientific discoveries and earned him the title of “the father of modern science” by Einstein (History, “When Galileo Stood Trial

for Defending Science”). In that light, if we blindly adhere to the majority view or our intuition, society’s moral progress will stagnate. Instead, while we should use our moral intuition, we must never trust it blindly, and instead constantly reevaluate it using all three normative ethics branches: deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics.

Morality, in its essence, is purely a subjective societal construct rather than a rigid set of rules. Having evolved over centuries through a combination of biological, cultural, religious, and psychological origins, it is open to revision and reinterpretation. Often, there is no one “right” choice in situations; there could be one, none, or multiple, and it is up to the individual to decide what action will have the most desirable outcome. Although our moral intuition and society’s common morality can provide scaffolding for our decisions, we cannot trust them blindly due to morality’s subjective nature. As humanity develops, we may come up with more accurate understandings of morality to help diminish the negative outcomes of decisions, but as of now, we must take our moral intuition at face value and refer to it as a guide, not a law.

*Author's Note*

Throughout my life, I've always found philosophy—or more precisely, the critical thinking within it—fascinating, though I never had the opportunity to formally study it. Last year, however, I was fortunate enough to attend the John Locke Summer School, where I studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Although it was only a two-week program, it ignited my interest in philosophy. I relished pondering the ambiguous topics the instructors presented to us and engaging in debates with classmates on questions where there are no right answers.

Coming into the Oxbow School's Final Project, I initially found myself at a loss; what topic did I want to spend an entire month exploring? However, the answer soon became clear. The subject of morality seemed like a natural fit for me, as I've always been intrigued by the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. I used to love watching "Buzzfeed Unsolved" and exploring the history of murderers. Despite the grim nature of these stories, the psychology behind them fascinated me; how did those murderers become who they were? If the abuse in their childhood—a common theme amongst murderers—never happened, would they still have committed their crimes? If not, are they truly "bad" people, or are they simply victims of their circumstances? My sympathy for their plight led me to ponder the nuanced spectrum of human behavior, and how there is no black and white in life; no one is born "good" or "bad". This reflection eventually guided me to my topic: can we trust our moral intuition?

The topic was broad and initially daunting; after all, how could I answer such a profound question? Is it even a question that *could* be answered? I started with perusing various philosophy articles, and there were times I wanted to quit. After all, you can only read the words "deontological ethics" so many times before you get sick of it. I embarked on this journey without an answer to my own question, and it seemed as though the more articles I read, the



more lost and conflicted I felt. Funnily enough, Reddit turned out to be my best friend; their r/askphilosophy subreddit were filled with discussions about my topic, and users were able to articulate their thoughts in a much more concise and easier to understand way than all the long philosophy papers I was reading, helping me develop my own viewpoint. But don't worry, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, I still love you despite how dense your entries are; overall, you were my single most useful resource, as evidenced by the fact that five out of my ten sources were from you.

But as grueling as the research process was, writing was even more challenging. After I surmised my thoughts into an outline, I sat down and wrote. Or more accurately, struggled to write. Since philosophy papers have a distinct writing style from other essays, I had to teach myself a crash course on philosophy, skimming through various philosophical papers to understand the style. Although this was my second time writing a philosophical paper, I still did not have a formal education in philosophy, so the writing style felt foreign to me, from using first-person to structuring arguments with premises. However, I soon fell into a rhythm, with the

words flowing out of me, and before I knew it, I was done.

Overall, my biggest challenge was developing my arguments. Despite the joy I found in critical thinking, there were times I accidentally contradicted myself and had to rewrite my outline, or even times I changed my views on the



My beautiful view when writing

topic entirely. The further I delved into my research, the more I realized how nuanced each philosophical perspective could be. Although I desperately wanted to answer my overarching question with a simple “yes” or “no”, I found that I couldn’t. The best I could give was a “maybe”. However, I realized that this ambiguity was integral to my paper; part of my argument was that morality—and in extension, life—isn’t so simple, and not everything is in pure black and white. In that light, perhaps my answer of “maybe” was quite fitting.

For the art component of my final project, I knew I wanted to create something that would visually represent the complexity of life, using shades of black, white, and gray, inspiring my idea for the isolated morality box. The monochromatic palette represents the ambiguity of moral dilemmas, and the small scale of the box—accommodating only one person at a time—underscores the solitude felt during moments of ethical contemplation. The warped mirror created from mylar film distorts reflections, symbolizing the challenges of moral dilemmas and the introspection they provoke.

I hope that my final project—whether through my paper or through my art—will allow viewers to realize that the world isn’t as black and white as they once thought. Moral dilemmas are not easy, but they are situations we face every day, from debating whether or not to return the extra change a cashier gives you, to telling the truth to a friend when they ask how they look while wearing an atrocious outfit. As we navigate these challenges, it becomes clear that understanding and compassion are key in grappling with the gray areas of morality. By reflecting on these dilemmas through various lenses—whether through written word or artistic expression—we can grow in our ability to make thoughtful, ethical decisions in a complex world.

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