Fresh Air?*

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1. Introduction

Imagine a closed room where the oxygen is running low. The people in the room are starting to doze off, and some are even on the verge of drifting into unconsciousness. When fresh air is finally let in, some are enlivened and energized, whereas others, who are in a sadder state, are less easily revived.

This image may come to mind when one ponders examples of when new empirical findings (from psychology, perhaps, or sociology or neuroscience) find their way into philosophical debates. Some get excited and write papers in which they enthusiastically describe the new results and indicate that they have far-reaching philosophical implications. Others are more skeptical, and tend almost automatically to think that research of this kind will leave philosophy as it is.

It seems to me that, boringly enough, it is often the sceptical attitude that wins out in the end. In the early papers, the arguments that are supposed to bring out the revolutionary implications are usually merely sketched. Later, when the details are to be filled in, things turn out to be more complicated than expected. The relevance of the new data is questioned, and the objections are in many cases so compelling that the findings are eventually forgotten, like ripples in a pond after a stone has been thrown in. The problem is that so many moves are open to a clever philosopher, that people will soon figure out ways to accommodate the new data within almost any philosophical theory.

One recent example of when new empirical data have stirred enthusiasm is the research about moral intuitions made by the philosopher Joshua Green, in

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collaboration with some psychologists and neuroscientists at Princeton University (see [Greene et al 2001]. Green and his colleagues used modern brain imaging techniques to explore what went on in people's brains when they were contemplating certain practical dilemmas. More specifically, they focused on different versions of Philippa Foot's well known "trolley case" (see [Foot 1967], but also [Thomson 1967]). In the original version of this case, a runaway trolley will kill five people if it is allowed to proceed on its present course. The only way to stop it is to flip a switch that will turn it onto another set of tracks where it will kill one person instead of five. Should you flip the switch? Most people say "yes". At the same time, most people deny that it would be legitimate to stop the trolley by instead pushing a stranger from a footbridge above the tracks (we assume that we cannot stop the trolley by jumping ourselves, since we weigh too little). This may seem surprising. In both cases, we save five persons by sacrificing one, and consistency might seem to require that we judge them similarly.

What Greene found, however, was that, when people were contemplating these cases, different areas in their brains were engaged. When the subjects considered the footbridge case, certain brain areas associated with emotions were activated. Reflection upon the original trolley case, by contrast, prompted engagement of areas associated with reasoning and cognition. This and similar results led the researchers to a general conclusion, namely that reflection upon "personal" cases–cases that would involve a personal violation–engages people's emotions in a way that "impersonal" cases do not. This is a very rough account of the results, and the conclusion has also been sligthly revised due to further research. But the details, for example regarding how to distinguish "personal" cases from "impersonal" ones, are not pertinent to the rest of my discussion.[1]

One of the philosophers who have been impressed by these results is Peter Singer (see in particular [Singer 2005]). Singer thinks that they undermine a certain way of arguing in normative ethics, namely the strategy of criticizing a moral principle or theory on the ground that it conflicts with common moral

[1] For a fuller account of the original study, see [Greene 2002].

"intuitions". For example, consider utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism we should always act so as to make the outcome best (where this could mean, for example, that it brings about a greater sum of well-being than its alternatives). So utilitarianism entails that it could be right to kill a person in order to benefit others. Indeed, if those people are sufficiently many, it could be right to kill him, even if these others are benefited just slightly and even if they are already quite well off. For some people, such a conclusion is appalling, and the fact that utilitarianism entails it is supposed to be enough to disqualify it as a serious contender.

However, Singer thinks that Greene's results, as well as other empirical research about moral intuitions,[2] show that this strategy is not viable. It is based on the assumption that intuitions should be treated as some kind of "data" or "evidence" against which moral principles are to be tested. And, according to Singer, Greene's results undermine this assumption. This also means, he thinks, that they cast doubt over the so-called method of reflective equilibrium.[3] For that method does indeed conceive of intuitions as a kind of evidence, at least in so far as they constitute "considered moral judgments". Roughly, the idea is that we should proceed by exploring which of a set of normative theories best squares with these judgments. If the theory found to be most promising still conflicts with some of them, we should modify it (or discard the recalcitrant judgment, at least if there is an independent reason for doing so), until we reach an "equilibrium". Having reached that state, we are justified in accepting the resulting theory. Singer has been skeptical toward the method of reflective equilibrium for a long

[2] There is more recent work in cognitive psychology that Singer takes to support his skepticism, such as the research by the psychologist Jonathan Haidt. See [Haidt 2001] and [Greene and Haidt 2002].

[3] We owe the notion of reflective equilibrium to John Rawls. See in particular [Rawls 1971], but also [Rawls 1951]. For later developments, see [Daniels 1979] and [Tersman 1993]. Daniels has stressed that the method prescribes seeking "wide" and not just "narrow" reflective equilibrium, where this involves assessing moral principles also from the point of view of certain "background theories". More of this later.

time (see, e.g., [Singer 1974], and thinks that Greene's results provide support for that skepticism.[4]

The purpose of this paper is to examine these contentions. I start by offering a definition of the notion of a moral intuition. I then distinguish between two ways in which Greene's findings might be argued to support a skeptical attitude towards intuitions. On the first line of criticism, only a subset of our intuitions is vulnerable to it. However, on this line of thought, the method of reflective equilibrium can easily accommodate the criticism (and remain a distinctive theory of the justification of moral claims). On the second line, the findings support a more general skepticism against intuitions, that in turn leads to general skepticism about the possibility of rational argumentation in ethics, regardless of which theory about justification we accept.

2. Moral Intuitions

By a moral intuition, I mean a moral claim that is accepted by someone not merely on the ground that he realizes that it follows from some moral theory or principle that he also accepts. Different people have different intuitions, and these are more or less confidently held. However, there are many intuitions that are both widely shared and strongly held. One example is the view that if an outcome A is better, from a moral point of view, than B, and if B is better than C, then A is also better than C. [5]

Notice that, given this definition, one can believe that there are intuitions without being committed to many of the metaphysical, normative and epistemological claims associated with the philosophers that are usually labeled

[4] Singer acknowledges that the method may be construed so as to accommodate the criticism against intuitions, by invoking the idea that we should search for "wide" equlibrium. But then Singer's charge is that it becomes "close to vacuous" [Singer 2005: 349].

[5] Someone might think that this intuition is not a good example of the kind of intuition used in the strategy of argumentation Singer criticizes, as it is "analytically" true, and that if someone were to deny it, this would just manifest the fact that she uses "better than" in an idiosyncratic way. This objection raises interesting questions, but I will briefly discuss it in a later passage.

"intuitionists" such as G.E. Moore, H.A. Pritchard and W.D. Ross. Thus, one is not committed to Moore's view that moral terms such as "good" and "right" stand for simple, unanalyzable non-natural properties (see [Moore 1903]), nor to the idea that we have some special cognitive faculty or organ by which we can grasp moral truths. The difference between moral intuitions and other moral convictions is simply that the former are not (only) held as the result of a conscious inference from a moral theory or principle.

There are er conceptions of a moral intuition than the one I have chosen. Some reserve the phrase "moral intuitions" for judgments that we make spontaneously without having given the evaluated case any serious thought at all. Some even reserve it for those not yet verbalized "gut-feelings" that precede the formation of a judgment with a content that can be captured in linguistic terms.[6] Singer sometimes seems to have such a notion in mind, but it is clearly too narrow in the present context. We want to explore the implications of Greene's results for the method of reflective equilibrium. And the judgments we are to "test" different principles against in this method (our "considered moral judgments") clearly also include judgments about cases that we have reflected upon, while they exclude mere "gut-feelings" that do not as yet constitute judgments.[7]

What Singer is critical about is that intuitions are taken as *evidence*; i.e., as having an analogous role to that of observations when scientists are testing empirical theories. The reason why observations have this role is that we normally have reason to think they reveal some truth about the aspect of reality we want to explore.[8] That is, generally, and unless we have some particular reason to suspect

[6] For a narrower conception of a moral intuition than mine, see for example [Björklund 2004].

[7] For Rawls's views about what qualifies as a considered moral judgment, see [Rawls 1971: 20-21, 47-48].

[8] Which beliefs are observational? Nothing in what follows hinges upon how to answer this question more specifically. However, in my view, a plausible suggestion is the Quinian one that observational beliefs are beliefs whose contents may be captured by sentences that we are prompted to accept on some occasions and reject on others depending on our sensory stimulations.

that an observational belief is formed under the influence of sub-optimal perceptual conditions or some other distorting factor, we have reason to believe that it is true, which is why a scientific theory that conflicts with it should be revised.[9] Singer suggests that Greene's results as well as other facts about how moral intuitions are formed show that they should not be assigned a similar status.

Let us call the status that is assigned to observations "initial credibility". I will assume that the claim that they have this status does not presuppose any foundationalist views to the effect that they are incorrigible, indubitable, or true with certainty. Indeed, I even take it to be compatible with the coherentist view that it holds for any belief that it is justified (for a person) to the extent that it coheres with (his) other beliefs. That is, if coherentism is correct, observational beliefs have initial credibility in virtue of the fact that our theories about the world and our perceptual apparatus suggest that they are formed in a way that indicates that they are true.

3. Distorting Factors

Why are Greene's results supposed to undermine the claim that moral intuitions have initial credibility?[10] Greene's results suggest that certain emotional responses have a causal role in the formation of at least some moral intuitions, such as the intuition that it would be wrong to push the stranger from the footbridge. Singer speculates about the evolutionary background of this mechanism. His idea is that the emotional responses underlying the intuitions

[9] Obviously, the real story is more complicated, due to the fact that no scientific theory has in itself have any observational implications, but only, as many have insisted, when combined with a set of auxiliary assumptions. It is possible that, in case of conflict, it is one of these that should be given up rather than the theory.

[10] Notice that the judgments that provide the target of his criticism are those that Singer refers to as our "ordinary" or "common" intuitions judgments (see [Singer 2005: 345f]), and he indicates that there are some intuitions (those that constitute "more reasoned conclusions") that may be untouched by the criticism. I will return to the issue of whether there is room for such a "diversified" position later. For now, I shall focus on the intuitions that Singer takes to be most vulnerable to the criticism.

have evolved since they helped our ancestors to respond adequately in situations with a risk of violent conflict and where these is no time for too much reflection. Due to the survival value of this propensity, it was passed on to further generations. To put it blunt, the moral philosophers of the Stone Age didn't live long enough to get offspring.

Now, on one suggestion, these underlying emotional responses represent a distorting factor on a par with the factors that lead us to discard observations, such as sub-optimal perceptual conditions. If someone claims to have seen a UFO we will be less impressed if we learn that he was heavily drunk. Similarly, if a moral intuition is influenced by the kind of emotional responses underlying people's judgment about the footbridge, it too must be seen with suspicion, according to the first construal of the argument.

Why are these emotions supposed to be a distorting factor? Apparently, there is some research indicating that when people's judgments in other areas are affected by their "gut-feelings", this detracts from their reliability, especially when they concern situations or cases that are significantly different from those that the feelings were formed to deal with.[11] We may trust the intuitions and hunches of an experienced mountain guide when planning a trek on the mountain, but not when it comes to a walk in the Australian bush. The idea is that we can extrapolate on this research to reach a similar conclusion about our moral intuitions. Singer writes:

> There is little point in constructing a moral theory designed to match considered moral judgments that themselves stem from our evolved responses to the situations in which we and our ancestors lived during the period of our evolution as social mammals, primates, and finally, human beings. We should, with our current powers of reasoning and our rapidly changing circumstances, be able to do better than that. [Singer 2005: 348]

[11] For some research about intuitions (in the narrower sense, conceived as "gut-feelings"), see [Barnes 1998] and [Klein 1998].

This may seem compelling, but some caution is needed. For, to begin with, it is not clear that the conclusions from research that concerns other areas can be extended to moral reasoning as well. This is in fact quite hard to determine, for, unlike in the case of predicting the weather on the mountain, it is doubtful if we have independent access to the truth of moral judgments. Moreover, there are special reasons to think that emotional involvement does not *in itself* detract from the reliability of our moral judgments. For example, it may be argued that a well-founded evaluation of a moral dilemma requires information about which interests are at stake. And that might presuppose some involvement of the inquirer's emotional life. Thus, some amount of empathy might be necessary in order to discern the interests.

More generally, Singer's reasoning seems based on a rather crude picture of the role of emotions, and the relationship between emotion, cognition and perception seems much more intimate and complex. Thus, contemporary research suggests that emotion plays a crucial role in our cognitive endavours in that they help to filter out irrelevant aspects of our perceptions and to reach more reliable answers to the questions we ponder.[12]

So, the idea that the engagement of one's emotions provides a distorting factor is less than obviously plausible. In my view, the most promising way to argue that the emotional involvement that Greene's results reveal is a distorting factor is to point out that it means that it takes an *effort* to question the intuitions. This was corroborated by the fact that it took longer time for those subjects who did, after all, judge the footbridge case just like the switch case to reach their judgment. That is, it seems that, in the footbridge case, we must work against a certain automatic tendency, which makes it easier to overlook relevant considerations and which might a reliable assessment more difficult. Similar tendencies might cause troubles in other contexts. For example, what is the color of the following word?

[12] See, e.g., [Le Doux 1996].

Green

Here too there is an impulse that might delay our reaching the correct verdict.

4. Debunking Explanations

I think the argument now sketched at best gives very weak support for the claim that moral intuitions are not reliable. However, there is another, and better, way to construe the challenge.

Greene's findings seem to fit within a broader evolutionary account of the origins of morality. In particular, they help to explain why the footbridge case and the switch case are judged differently. For in the latter case, there has not been a similar pressure to develop immediate emotional responses. Singer points out that, for most of the time in which humans have existed, they have lived in small groups, and violence was inflicted by "hitting, pushing, strangling, or using a stick or stone as a club" [Singer 2005: 347f]. The indirect way of killing people that the switch case represents, by contrast, is relatively new.

In one passage, it seems that Singer thinks that this explanation rules out that there is a morally relevant difference between the cases. Thus, he says that

> the salient feature that explains our different intuitive judgments concerning the two cases is that the footbridge case is the kind of situation that was likely to arise during the eons of time over which we were evolving; whereas the standard trolley case describes a way of bringing about someone's death that has only been possible in the past century or two.

And then he asks, rhetorically, "what is the moral salience of the fact that I have killed someone in a way that was possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became possible only two hundred years ago? I would answer: none." [Singer 2005: 348]

However, that way of stating the challenge is misleading. The fact that this particular difference has no moral salience does not imply that there is no relevant

difference. The error stems from an ambiguity concerning the phrase "explain an intuition".

It is customary to distinguish between the content of a conviction, and the conviction itself. The former is a proposition (at least if the conviction constitutes a belief) whereas the latter is a psychological state. Now, suppose that someone believes that the earth is round. To explain this belief could either be to explain why the person has come to hold it, or to explain why the proposition that constitutes its content is true. An explanation of the former kind will presumably invoke assumptions about the believer's education. To explain the belief in the latter sense, by contrast, is to explain why the earth is round, and such an explanation would rather invoke assumptions about cosmology and physics. Similarly, an explanation of the intuition that it is wrong to push the stranger (but right to flip the switch) could either be an explanation of why people have come to form this conviction or of why it *is* wrong to push the stranger (but right to throw the switch).

Now, the explanation of people's intuitions that Singer offers—the one that appeals to the fact that the switch case represents a way of killing that was not around when humans evolved—is clearly of the former kind. And one can accept this explanation without being committed to any particular view about why it is wrong to push the stranger but right to flip the switch. Thus, one can agree that "the fact that I have killed someone in a way that was possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became possible only two hundred years ago" has no moral salience, and still think that there *is* a morally salient difference between these cases.

However, there is a better way to bring out the potential significance of the explanation. The question is if moral intuitions can serve as evidence. Now, one way to state why observations have such a role in science is to say that, in many cases, the fact that we make an observation is best explained by assuming that it is *true*.[13] For example, when sensory stimulations prompt us to believe that there are

[13] Gilbert Harman famously makes this point in [Harman 1977].

people around us, this is usually due to the fact that there *are* people around us. This is why we have reason to reject theories that conflict with our observations.

What Greene's results do, however, when combined with the evolutionary story, is to suggest that the same does not hold for moral intuitions. In particular, it suggests that we can explain why we intuitively judge the footbridge case and the switch case differently without assuming that there *is* a difference. Therefore, the fact that we do judge these cases differently provides no reason to think that there is a difference, or to reject principles that entail that there is none.[14]

I shall call the kind of explanation that Singer offers of the judgment that it would be wrong to push the stranger but right to flip the switch a "debunking" explanation. A "debunking" explanation is an explanation of a fact which is offered as evidence for a theory or claim that does not entail that the claim is true or even significantly likely. To provide such explanations is a common way to question the significance of considerations offered as evidence. For example, they are used for questioning witness testimonies in legal cases.

Almost twenty years ago, the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was shot dead on a street in Stockholm when he was walking home in the evening together with his wife Lisbeth. The police eventually caught a man for doing it, a man by the name Christer Pettersson. The case was tried in court and Pettersson was found guilty, primarily on the basis of Palme's widow's testimony, as there was no physical evidence that tied him to the crime. Lisbeth Palme had identified him in a line-up, in which he appeared with a number of other men.

However, when the case was tried in the Court of Appeal, Pettersson was acquitted. For it was found that Palme's widow had got certain information before the identification that pointed her in the direction of Pettersson. She had been told that the suspect was an alcoholic and a homeless person, and Pettersson was the only such person in the line-up (the rest were police officers). And as Lisbet Palme was a social worker, she was familiar with signs of alcoholism. Therefore, her testimony was not considered reliable.

[14] So construed, Singer's challenge is simply a version of Harman's well known argument against moral realism. See [Harman 1977: Chapter 1].

These considerations undermine the evidentiary value of the widow's testimony as they provide material for a debunking explanation. For, even if the explanation that appeals to the police's indiscretion does not *exclude* that Pettersson killed Palme, it doesn't assume it either. Therefore, since the truth of that explanation couldn't be ruled out, the mere fact that the widow pointed Pettersson out in the line-up wasn't thought to provide sufficient reason for thinking that he killed Palme. And since that was the prosecution's strongest card, Pettersson was released. Similarly, since Greene's results provide material for a debunking explanation of people's tendency to think that pushing the stranger would be wrong while throwing the switch would be right means that this piece of "evidence" also can be questioned.

Notice that the way I have now construed the challenge is quite different from the way it was construed in the previous section. According to the first construal, our intuitions are (sometimes) explained by factors indicating that they are false or irreliably formed (formed in a way indicating that they are false). The idea behind the second is rather that we lack positive reason to think it is true. The conclusion of the second argument is therefore weaker than that of the first. We may lack reason to think that a belief is formed in a way that indicates that it is true, even if we have no particular reason to suspect that it is false. Still, if we have no reason to think that our intuitions are reliably formed, treating them as evidence appears unjustified. In the next section, when I discuss the implications for reflective equilibrium, I shall mainly be concerned with the first line of criticism. I'll turn to the second in section 6.

5. Reflective Equilibrium

In some passages, Singer's skepticism against the method of reflective equilibrium seems to stem not (only) from concerns about the reliability of our intuitions but from the belief that it somehow misconstrues the whole point of formulating normative theories.[15] Thus, he writes that the analogy between the

[15] Since Singer explicitly says that his criticism against intuitions has more general implications for moral methodology (in that it is supposed to undermine

testing of normative theories against our intuitions and the testing of scientific theories against our observations, is fundamentally misconceived, since

> [a] normative theory […] is not trying to explain our common moral intuitions. […] For a normative moral theory is not an attempt to answer the question 'Why do we think as we do about moral questions?' [Singer 2005: 345]

Instead, a normative theory is an attempt to answer the question "What ought we to do?", and Singer suggests that the advocates of the method have overlooked that obvious fact.

However, this reasoning is fallacious, due to the ambiguity of "explain an intuition" mentioned above. To explain someone's belief could either be to explain why he holds the belief or to explain why the proposition that constitutes its content is true. The fact that a normative theory is not meant to explain our moral intuitions in the former sense does not exclude that they should explain them in the latter. And it is only in the latter sense that normative theories should explain our moral intuitions, according to the method of reflective equilibrium.

But the challenge that has to do with the reliability of moral intuitions still remains. Scientific theories should explain observations, as it is likely that the propositions that constitute their contents are true. And if no similar claim can be made about moral intuitions, by requiring that moral theories must square with them, the method of reflective equilibrium treats them too respectfully.

Singer acknowledges that Rawls stressed that it might occasionally be reasonable to reject the intuitions rather than the theory we explore in case of conflict. In such cases, we should go "back and forth", and both modify the theory and discard some of the conflicting judgments, until coherence is achieved. However, even given this feature of the method, it entails that too many of our

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the method of reflective equilibrium), I shall ignore the possibility that he merely wants to question certain particular intuitions, namely those that are supposed to cast doubt over his own favorite principle (utilitarianism).

intuitions will have to be preserved, according to Singer. For he thinks that the criticism against intuitions that Greene's results lend support for shows that a method of moral reasoning is plausible only if it allows for the possibility that we end up with a moral theory that conflicts with *all* our "common" or "ordinary" moral intuitions. For example, he thinks it must exclude that a plausible answer to the question "What ought we to do?" is to say "Ignore all our ordinary moral judgments, and do what will produce the best consequences". And he adds:

> My point is that the model of reflective equilibrium, at least as presented in *A Theory of Justice*, appears to rule out such an answer, because it assumes that our moral intuitions are some kind of data from which we can learn what we ought to do.[16]

The qualification about *A Theory of Justice* is prompted by the fact that, in more recent discussions of the method, versions have been developed that appear to assign less weight to intuitions. In particular, he alludes to the distinction between "wide" and "narrow" reflective equilibrium that is stressed by Norman Daniels.[17] The idea that we should seek a wide equilibrium, and not merely settle for a narrow one, increases the revisionary element of the method. For it entails that conflicts between our considered judgments and the theory we work with is not the only reason we may have for discarding such judgments. We must also consider their coherence with certain "background theories", and these may give us reason to hold on to a theory even if it conflicts radically with our considered judgments. However, Singer believes that this move saves the method only at the prize of making it "close to vacuous" (see Singer 2005: 349). Singer's claim about the method of reflective equilibrium can accordingly be stated: It is either

[16] [Singer 2005: 346]. He also says that a "normative ethical theory […] is not trying to explain our common moral intuitions. It might reject all of them, and still be superior to other normative theories" [Singer 2005: 345].

[17] See [Daniels 1979]. However, Daniels stresses that the distinction was already implicit in [Rawls 1971], and explicit in [Rawls 1974/75].

implausible, as it is too conservative relative to our moral intuitions, or devoid of content. I shall argue that this claim is false.

One thing to note about Singer's view is that it is merely our "common" or "ordinary" intuitions whose rejection a plausible method must allow for, not *all* our intuitions. And, even given this qualification, it is surely too strong. As Philippa Foot and others have pointed out, there are limits to which moral claims we can deny if we want to make any such claims at all.[18] For example, consider the claim that permissible actions are sometimes right, or the view that if A is better than B, and B is better than C then A is better than C. Maybe it is possible to reject the latter claim and still hold intelligible views about what is good and bad.[19] But if we combine this denial with the denial of the claim that if some state is better than another, this is a reason for preferring the first to the second, it is not clear that these views represent any moral belief at all. Surely, the view about the transitivity of betterness is a "common" intuition.[20] So, if we are to construe Singer's anti-conservatism charitably, it entails at most that *some* of our "common" intuitions are such that a plausible moral method should allow us to reject them.[21]

Moreover, the intuitions Singer is really skeptical about, and to which the brain research is most relevant, is those that constitute mere spontaneous reactions

[18] See [Foot 1978], where she suggests, for example, that "it would not do to suppose that, for instance, someone might have a *morality* in which the ultimate principle was that it was wrong to round trees right handed or to look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon" (xii).

[19] For example, Derek Parfit suggests this possibility when discussing cases where a group causes great harm, even if every individual's contribution to this harm is imperceptible. See [Parfit 1984: 79]. However, Parfit dismisses it without much discussion.

[20] Someone might object that my examples concern intuitions that are analytically true, and that Singer's skepticism only applies to substantial ones. But this distinction is notoriously unclear, as Quine and others have shown us. For further discussion of these issues, see [Tersman 2006].

[21] How should we delimit the set of claims that are such that we may deny those claims and still have intelligible views about morality? This is a tricky question, but it has no bearing on the argument I shall pursue.

and are not based on much reasoning or reflection. But, again, this is also just a subset of the judgments that qualify as intuitions given my definition. Indeed, Singer concedes, or wants to leave open, that there are some intuitions—those he call our "more reasoned conclusions—that are not vulnerable to the criticism (more about those later).

The problem is that the subset of intuitions Singer is critical toward does not correspond well to the set taken as evidence by the theory of reflective equilibrium. According to the theory of reflective equilibrium, it is our "considered moral judgments" that we should test principles against. The considered judgments of a person are, roughly, those that are held with some confidence, not distorted by self-interest and prejudice, and based on well-grounded information and sound inference patterns.[22] The idea is to filter out those intuitions that we have some particular reason to be suspicious toward. This means that our considered judgment may include the intuitions Singer is more sympathetic toward (those that are "more reasoned"), whereas mere spontaneous "gut-reactions" are excluded. Thus, it seems that Singer's criticism largely misses the target.

This is even more clearly seen once one acknowledges that the notion of a considered moral judgment is open to revision. Consider the finding that some of our intuitions are influenced by certain evolved emotional responses, and suppose that this means that they are not reliable. Maybe Rawls did not think about this when defining the concept of a considered moral judgment. But there is no reason why this new knowledge should not lead us to revise the definition. Rawls wanted to exclude judgments that are formed under the influence of distorting factors. So, if influence of the kind Greene has uncovered is one such factor, we should accommodate his results by requiring that considered moral judgments exclude intuitions thus influenced. This is congenial with the dynamic nature of the

[22] Rawls started to develop this concept in [Rawls 1951], and in this paper he only seemed to have counted judgments about particular (and real) cases. However, in [Rawls 1971], he also included general and theoretical judgments, as well as judgments about imagined cases.

method, and with the central idea that we should always be prepared to make further revisions of our beliefs in view of new considerations.

What this means is that the method can accommodate the criticism that Greene's results lend support for.[23] Does it thereby dissolve into vacuity? Well, what does that mean? On one interpretation, the method is "close to vacuous" if there is no moral theory or principle such that it excludes our ending up with it. But this notion of "vacuity" is irrelevant. The method of reflective equilibrium is an *epistemological* theory, not a normative one, and it is as an epistemological theory the claim about "vacuity" should be assessed. I suspect that Singer's failure to see this has to do with the fact that he associates the method with anti-utilitarianism, perhaps as it was introduced by Rawls. But there really is no such connection. A utilitarian may well accept that method, and try to use it for justifying her position.

Moreover, conceived as an epistemological theory, it entails several distinctive and controversial claims. Singer says that, given the "wide" interpretation of the method, foundationlism merely becomes the "limiting case" of the method (see 347). However, this is false. The method of reflective equilibrium is incompatible with foundationalism. Obviously, there are different versions of foundationalism. Some assume that the beliefs that are supposed to provide the foundation must be incorrigible or true with certainty while others deny this. However, they all agree that at least some of the justification

[23] Moreover, notice that, unlike what Singer suggests, the distinction between narrow and wide reflective equilibrium plays no role here, at least not in the form developed by Norman Daniels. For Daniels do not count purely empirical theories, such as the evolutionary story that Singer sketches, as background theories in the relevant sense. The reason is that he believes that this would presuppose a "reduction of the moral [...] to the nonmoral". Instead, he conceives of them as moral claims, although highly theoretical and abstract ones. Daniels wants the background theories to "show that the moral principles [...] are more acceptable than alternative principles on grounds to some degree independent of [their] match with relevant considered moral judgments [....]". But he thinks that this can be achieved by requiring, e.g., that they must "not incorporate the same type of moral notions as are employed by the principles and those considered judgments relevant to 'testing" the principles. See [Daniels 1979: 259-260], for this reasoning, and for all the quotes in this paragraph.

foundational beliefs must have is independent of their coherence with the rest of the agent's beliefs. This is denied by the method of reflective equilibrium.

Another distinctive claim follows from the concept of coherence that is used. Coherence is a matter of certain evidential and explanatory relations holding between the agent's moral views, where some explain and others are explained by the rest (relative to the agent's nonmoral beliefs). This in turn entails that a reflective equilibrium is achieved only if the agent has come to accept certain general normative views, which is why Rawls stressed that we should proceed by confronting our considered judgments with principles. There are ideas about the justification of moral claims that deny that justification of moral beliefs requires general principles. For example, it is denied by the approach called "moral particularism" [see, e.g., Dancy 1993]. Thus, the method of reflective equilibrium can accommodate the criticism of intuitions without dissolving into vacuity.

6. Can We Avoid General Skepticism?

Let us turn to the second line of criticism. On this idea, intuitions cannot reasonably be treated as evidence as Greene's et al results provide material for debunking explanations. The question I want to address in this section is whether one can use this line of reasoning without committing oneself to a more general skepticism about morals; i.e., to the view that *no* moral claim is justified.

Singer is open to the possibility that Greene's results might lead to such skepticism, but he wants to avoid it. He concedes that he too, must ultimately rely on intuitions (for example when defending his utilitarianism), such as "the intuition that five deaths are worse than one, or more fundamentally, the intuitions that it is a bad thing if a person I killed" [Singer 2005: 350]. [24] But the idea he wants to pursue is that these intuitions are not vulnerable to the kind of criticism that Greene's and Haidt's research lends support for, as they represent "more

[24] Singer is reluctant to call these claims "intuitions". But, given my definition of the term, they clearly are. In any case, regardless of what we call them, the important question is if they avoid the criticism he raises against other intuitions.

reasoned conclusions", which, he thinks, obtains support from the above-mentioned finding about longer reaction times for those who do, after all, judge the footbridge case in the same way as the switch case. For this indicates, he thinks, that although they had the same emotional responses against pushing the stranger as the others, reasoning and reflection led them to reach a different answer.[25] And as for the intuition that it is a bad thing that a person is killed, he adds that this intuition "does not seem to be one that is the outcome of our evolutionary past" [Singer 2005: 305] as there is no reason to expect that such an attitude would have evolved through natural selection.[26] He concludes:

> Thus the "intuition" that tells us that the death of one person is a lesser tragedy than the death of five is not like the intuitions that tell us we may throw the switch, but not push the stranger off the footbridge. It may be closer to truth to say that it is a rational intuition, something like the three 'ethical axioms' or 'intuitive propositions of real clearness and certainty' to which Henry Sidgwick appeals in his defense of utilitarianism in *The Methods of Ethics*. The third of these axioms is 'the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other'. [Singer 2005: 305f]

However, the fact that there is no genetically hardwired love for mankind in general and that reflection has had an important role in the formation of these "more reasoned" intuitions does neither exclude that there is material for a debunking explanation of them too nor that evolutionary considerations have a role to play in such an explanation.

For example, one of the strategies Singer uses in trying to undermine our intuitions is to point out that they are a heritage from our Christian past:

[25] Singer argues that the data showing greater activity in parts of their brain associated with cognitive processes suggests the same conclusion.

[26] See [Singer 2005: 305]. In this context, Singer quotes Hume's remark that "there is no […] passion in human minds as the love of mankind, merely as such".

> On abortion, suicide, and voluntary euthanasia, for instance, we may think as we do because we have grown up in a society that was, for nearly 2000 years, dominated by the Christian religion. We may no longer believe in Christianity as a moral authority, but we may find it difficult to rid ourselves of moral intuitions shaped by our parents and our teachers, who were either themselves believers, or were shaped by others who were. [Singer 2005: 345]

This connects with his point in an earlier paper:

> Why should we not rather make the opposite assumption, that all the particular moral judgments we intuitively make are likely to derive from discarded religious systems, from warped views of sex and bodily functions, or from customs necessary for the survival of the group in social and economic circumstances that now lie in the distant past? In which case, it would be best to forget all about our particular moral judgments, and start again from as near as we can get to self-evident moral axioms. [Singer 1974: 516].

However, the Christian influence does not only provide material for a debunking explanation of intuitions about suicide, but also of Sidgwick's "axiom" that "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". Already from the start, Christian ethics involved the belief that many differences that had previously been regarded as morally relevant, such as ethnicity or differences in class, are not in fact so. Any person could be a Christian, and the love towards others that is prescribed by the faith should be extended beyond family and tribe, and even to people beyond the Christian community. This was something entirely new, and could not be found in, for example, Judaism or the pagan religions that at the time existed in the Roman Empire. For example, consider this quote from a letter by the early bishop Cyprian of Carthago (born around 200 AD) to his congregation:

> [T]here is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well […]. Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.[27]

In fact, as Rodney Stark argues in his book *The Rise of Christianity*,[28] this aspect of Christianity probably strongly contributes to the explanation of how it came to be the dominant religion in the highly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Roman Empire. The economic and political unity that Rome had created had led to a cultural chaos, where people with different gods, languages, and upbringings had been dumped together helter-skelter in cities and army units. It is easy to see that Christianity served an important function in this context, as it offered a universalistic and seemingly coherent morality entirely stripped of ethnicity. Moreover, it is equally easy to see how this heritage, that as Singer stresses has had such a deep impact on the culture of the present day, has encouraged the train of thought that leads to the conclusion that the good of none is less important from a moral point of view than the good of any other,[29] especially in the case of a

[27] The quote is found in [Harnack 1908]. See pp. 172-173.

[28] The subtitle is *How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*.

[29] That this idea that differences in ethnicity and so on are morally irrelevant has a central role in Western culture is manifested in numerous ways. Thus, remember Shylock's words in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Act III, Scene 1):

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? (Quoted from [Shakespeare 1923].

philosopher like Sidgwick who so strenuously searched for consistency and generality. Indeed, replace ”Universe” with ”God”, and you get a doctrine that will impress many a Christian. The emergence of the Christian faith is clearly one step of the "expansion of the circle" that Peter Singer so often writes about.[30]

However, there are plenty of other possibilities. Thus, consider the intuition that the death of one is a lesser tragedy than the death of five. If badness is conceived as a quantity, it is easy to see how the mere fact that the number five is greater than one can lead to that conclusion.

Indeed, facts about how reasoning proceeds in general may more or less *in themselves* provide material for debunking explanations. Consider again the intuition that no one's good is less important than any one else's from a moral point of view. When people, or at least philosophers, reason in ethics, the same processes are at work as those that operate when we reason in other areas. Thus, we search for consistency, coherence, and generality. We try to find relevant similarities and to ignore irrelevant differences. One doesn't need much to work with in order for see how this procedure might lead one to a conclusion such as Singer's. Thus, through natural selection, people have been endowed with the disposition to shy pain and death. This disposition is encapsulated or verbalized in the judgment that our own pain and death is bad. Now, if we take the "point of view of the universe", and if we are to avoid the conclusion that, if our pain is bad, so is the pain of others, we must point to some relevant difference between others and ourselves that explains this. It takes just a little bit of skepticism to reach the conclusion that there is no such difference. After all, an experience of

[30] Of course, this is a debunking explanation only if we can explain the emergence of Christianity as a cultural force without assuming that any of its basic ethical beliefs are true. But since it merely appeals to its social function, it clearly satisfies this condition. Moreover, Singer needs to make exactly the same assumption in offering his debunking explanations of people's intuitions about suicide. Also, notice in this connection that Singer thinks that one consideration that helps to explain why humans have evolved a propensity for moral thinking is that they have helped them to solve various Prisoner Dilemma-type coordination cases, and therefore been selected through natural selection (see [Singer 2005: 335f]). This explanation can possibly also be extended to explain the aim to look away from differences that is central in Christian Ethics.

pain is not less painful if it is someone else's. So, if it is the pain itself, or the state of being in pain, that is bad, the step to the conclusion that all pains are equally important is not long.

This means that Singer's "rational intuitions" are also vulnerable to the challenge that appeals to debunking explanations. So if we take this challenge seriously, his examples give us no reason to think that general skepticism can be avoided. What it also means is that, in order to show that an intuition can reasonably be treated as a premise in further reasoning it is not enough to show that there is no particular reason to think that it is *irreliably* formed. We must also show, more positively, that the way it is formed indicates that it *is* reliable, for example as the best explanation of it assumes its truth. Clearly, Greene's and Haidt's research does not provide us with such an argument. For the mere fact that reasoning has been involved in the formation of some intuitions do not make them reliable. After all, if a clever person believes in angels, she will be able to reach "reasoned conclusions" about the number of angels that can simultaneously dance on a needle's top. This does not give us a reason to rely on her conclusions

What must we do, then, to avoid general skepticism? We must show that there are examples of intuitions for which no debunking explanation can be given, or for which it can be shown that the debunking explanations are inferior to explanations that assume that the intuitions are true.

This is, of course, nothing but the challenge to moral realism that Gilbert Harman has raised. There has been a huge discussion about this argument,[31] and this is not the place to try to adjudicate that debate. Let me just note that I agree with Harman that a successful response requires that the realist gives a believable account of *how* moral facts are supposed to affect our thinking. In the absence of a believable account of the relevant mechanism, he suggests, we should be skeptical towards accounts of our moral judgments that invoke moral facts. For example, Harman considers a case where Jane sees that Albert hits a cat with a stick:

[31] For some contributions, see [Sayre-McCord 1998].

> What's needed is some account of *how* the actual wrongness of Albert's action could help to explain Jane's disapproval of it. And we have to be able to believe in this account. We cannot just make something up, saying, for example, that the wrongness of the act affects the quality of the light reflected into Jane's eyes, causing her to react negatively. That would be an example of wrongness manifesting itself in the world in a way that could serve as evidence for and against certain moral claims, but it is not something we can believe in. [Harman 1986: 62]

Someone might object that the same holds for perceptual or observational beliefs.[32] But this seems to me wrong. For example, consider beliefs about color. We know that the fact that some object is, say, red implies that its surface has a certain microphysical structure. This structure is responsible for the fact that the surface, when illuminated with white light, reflects photons at certain wavelengths while absorbing others. If the object had been, say, green, photons at other wave lengths had been reflected, and so on. The light reflected by the object would, if we were rightly placed with our eyes open, etc, hit the retinas of our eyes, and through the optical nerve cause certain cerebral processes in the visual cortex and other parts of the brain. Subsequently, the causal chain ends up in the belief that the object is red. It is the availability of this account that justifies thinking that the best explanation of beliefs about color sometimes involves the assumption that they are true.

Could a similar account be given in the case of moral beliefs? Personally, I doubt it. The present point, however, is that this is what needs to be done in order to avoid general skepticism, at least if we take the challenge from debunking explanations seriously.

[32] For example, Mark Nelson writes "we do no have non-circular reasons for thinking our ordinary physical perceptions are true, either, but we don't hesitate to regard *them* as credible" [Nelson 1999: 71]. This point is dubious. In the case of physical perceptions, we do have theories that cohere with the rest of our beliefs, and suggest that they are reliable. There is no analogue in the case of moral intuitions.

7. Conclusion

I have discussed two ways to try to squeeze out sceptical implications from Greene's et al findings about the role of emotions in the formation of (some) moral intuitions. The first is to argue that these emotions have a distorting role, similar to that of sub-optimal perceptual conditions. The second is to argue that the findings provide material for debunking explanations. The latter argument aims to show that there is no reason to think that the intuitions have been formed in a way that indicates that they are true. This is a weaker conclusion than that of the first. That there is no reason to think that an intuition is formed in a way that indicates that it is true does not entail that there is some special reason to think that it is formed in a way that indicates that it is false

The latter strategy is, in my view, by far the most promising. It is not clear why the emotions should be seen as a distorting factor. And, besides, even if they should, this could easily be accommodated by the method of reflective equilibrium, simply by excluding intuitions formed under the influence of them from the set of our considered moral judgments. *Pace* what Singer suggests, this revision does not make the method "close to vacuous", as it still entails many controversial claims about what it takes for moral views to be justified.

The problem with the second challenge, however, is that if we take it seriously, it threatens not only the intuitions on which Greene et al have focused but all intuitions. Thus, as I have tried to illustrate, the mere fact that reasoning has crucially been involved in the formation of an intuition does not make it safe. And if none of our moral convictions--if none of the moral beliefs that function as premises in our arguments for normative theories--is formed in a way that indicates that it is true, then those theories stand without real support.

This is not specifically a problem for the idea of reflective equilibrium, however, but for all methods that optimistically assume that there are such things as justified moral convictions. Maybe there is a way to justify moral claims

without relying on intuitions. Some such attempts have been made,[33] and this is not the place to discuss them. However, I must admit what I have seen along this line so far hasn't reassured me.

The view that there is no real room for justification in ethics might seem an unwelcome conclusion (it is for me at least). But its unwelcomeness does not provide an argument against it. It can be seen as a part of the re-evaluation of man that started with Darwin and whose far-reaching implications have not yet quite oozed down into the Western culture, whose immunodefence against thoughts that challenge its basic tenets seems incredibly strong.

Is there, then, no role for rationality in ethics at all? Well, of course we could say that it has a role when we try to determine the best means for achieving the goals that we happen to judge desirable. We may also say that some reason better in ethics than others in the sense that they are better at spotting and eliminating inconsistencies in their system of moral judgments, and at revising their views so as to achieving coherence. But the fact remains that if none of these judgments has been formed in a way that indicates that it is true, the theories that this activity might end up in are as little likely to be true as an account of one's childhood, however coherent, if the memories it ultimately relies on are the result of wishful thinking.[*]

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[33] For one prominent example, see [Gauthier 1986].

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