

Moral Realists and the Problem of Moral Knowledge

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Moral realists believe that moral propositions are truth apt and that some of them are true objectively. However, for moral realism to stand a chance in the metaethical arena, the moral realist must answer how these objective moral truths could be known. Michael Huemer provides a theory for forming moral beliefs in his work, *Ethical Intuitionism*. Huemer, a moral realist, advocates for a moral epistemology known as moral intuitionism. In this theory, ethical intuitions provide justification for forming moral beliefs. However, in the following sections, I will argue that (1) moral intuitions, as a subset of intellectual seemings, can be rejected without that rejection leading to global skepticism, and (2) we have reason to doubt that appearance intuitionism is a reliable way of forming moral beliefs.

In the first section, I explain the theory of appearance intuitionism. In the following section, I explore “the argument from disagreement” as an initial objection to appearance intuitionism, and I consider Huemer’s rejoinder. Third, I argue that there are different types of seemings and that potentially unreliable types of seemings can be rejected without entailing global skepticism. Then, I provide reasons for doubting moral

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appearances as reliable. Finally, I sketch a few positive alternatives to appearance intuitionism for the moral realist.

Section I: Appearance Intuitionism

Before beginning my argument, I will explain the theory of appearance intuitionism. Michael Huemer presents ethical intuitionism as a way for moral realists to claim knowledge of objective moral principles. He bases his intuitionist theory on the principle of “phenomenal conservatism” (99). This principle states that “it is reasonable to assume [*prima facie*] that things are the way they appear” (99).

Huemer defines an “appearance” as a mental state containing the propositional content “it seems” (99). These seemings are not synonymous with beliefs, but they do typically help us form our beliefs. As Huemer posits, all of our judgments are “based upon how things seem to the judging agent” (101). Further, there are ways “things seem to us prior to [any] reasoning” (101). Huemer calls seemings that occur before reason “initial appearances.” Huemer clarifies that “appearances” is a broad category that includes appearances of different types. Specifically, Huemer differentiates appearances into perceptual appearances, mnemonic appearances, introspective appearances, and intellectual appearances. These two claims, that there are different types of seemings and that some seemings are prior to reasoning, are central to Huemer’s definition of an intuition. Huemer takes an intuition to be “an initial, intellectual appearance” (102). If an initial intellectual appearance contains evaluative properties, then it is an ethical intuition. Thus, ethical intuitions are initial intellectual seemings that contain evaluative properties. According to Huemer, these ethical intuitions then become a tool for moral reasoning. They are the foundational assumptions that help our reasoning get off the ground (101).

Huemer argues that ethical intuitions exist and that they help us form moral beliefs (103). As his principle of Phenomenal Conservatism implies, it is rational to believe that things are as they appear to us. Therefore, our ethical intuitions provide *prima facie* justification for moral beliefs. He emphasizes that we should not trust all of our intuitions, as some appearances can be misleading. As Huemer states, a rational person *only* believes what seems true to her, but she “does not believe *everything* that seems true” (101). Through the description summarized in this section, Huemer believes that he has sufficiently explained both what an intuition is, and how moral intuitions can lead someone to moral knowledge (102).

Section II: Immediate Objections and Rejoinders

One common objection to intuitionism is “the argument from disagreement.” Although Huemer addresses this challenge in his book, this objection and Huemer’s rejoinder are both important to the argument I wish to offer. Therefore, I will use this section to quickly illustrate the debate. The anti-intuitionist argues the following:

- (1) There is genuine and common moral disagreement.
- (2) If intuitionism were true, genuine moral disagreement would probably not be as common as it is.
- (3) Therefore, intuitionism is probably false. (Huemer 133)

Essentially, the anti-intuitionist argues that if there are objective moral truths, and if these truths are accessible to everyone through an innate faculty, then we should expect very little moral disagreement. As Huemer puts it, “intuitionism renders improbable disagreements of the kind and number” found in moral philosophy (134). As a rebuttal, Huemer provides a few reasons why moral disagreement is not surprising, even if we have some faculty for moral intuition.

As stated in section I, Huemer readily acknowledges that not all seemings are reliable and that there are predictable sources of error in appearances (100). In fact, Huemer believes that there is a “menagerie of errors” that could account for intuitive disagreement (137). He lists fourteen, including: bias, hasty judgment, stubbornness, the intrinsic difficulty of issues, and unarticulated assumptions, among others (138). This list is non-exhaustive as there could be other sources of error (such as the emotional weight of the moral debate) not made explicit by Huemer (139). Further, Huemer argues that disagreement is predictable. He asserts that the above-listed conditions are more prone to cause error in cases where there is “strong and frequent bias.” For example, when people defer to culture or tradition, where people rely on religion, or when the case is philosophical. So, Huemer concludes, it is unsurprising that moral disagreement exists.

The obvious rejoinder for the anti-intuitionist is something along the lines of “Isn’t that ‘menagerie of errors’ a good reason *not* to trust ethical appearances?” The factors that lead to moral disagreement seem

to threaten the reliability of moral intuitions. So, *we should only believe our moral intuitions if we have no good reason to think that they are unreliable.*

Huemer does not respond to this specific objection. However, he does offer a rejoinder to a stronger, positive version of this objection. He considers the objection “We need positive reasons for believing our ethical intuitions . . . otherwise, intuitions cannot justify our moral beliefs” (107). Huemer responds by arguing that *all* of our judgments, and therefore all of our beliefs, are fundamentally based on appearances and intuitions (107). So, to question our moral seemings on these grounds is to question all of our beliefs, thus plunging the objector into global skepticism. Moreover, any argument against his principle of phenomenal conservatism “amounts to a [global] philosophical skepticism” (101). To Huemer, global skepticism is untenable for the serious philosopher. So, by means of a “Moorean shift,” any argument that ends in global skepticism must be rejected.

In the following sections, I reject Huemer’s rejoinder. I soften the positive objection, “we need good reason to believe our intuitions” to the more reasonable, negative objection, “*we should only believe our intuitions if we have no good reason to disbelieve them.*” From this objection, I argue that one could doubt moral seemings without entailing global skepticism. Further, I argue that we do have good reason to disbelieve our moral seemings.

Section III: Rejecting Moral Seemings Would Not Entail Skepticism

IIIa. Variable Reliability between Types of Appearances

In this section, I argue that ethical intuitions, as a subset of intellectual seemings, can be rejected without that rejection leading to global skepticism. Huemer claims that all beliefs are built on appearances, so one cannot reject moral appearances without risking global skepticism. Though it may be true that all beliefs are built on appearances, it is not true that all beliefs are built on moral appearances. As Huemer posits, there are different kinds of appearances. Seemings could be intellectual, perceptual, mnemonic, or introspective (99). Thus, Huemer’s claim that all beliefs bottom-out in appearances must be coupled with the fact that not all appearances are identical in type.

These different types of appearances do not share the same level of reliability. Huemer concedes that while comparing seemings, some appearances are “stronger” or “more obvious” than others (100). He argues

that we should always reject the weaker seeming and hold on to the stronger seeming. I argue that this principle does not only apply to appearances of the same type, but also applies between the classes of appearances. Some types of appearances are consistently more reliable than others, so we favor them in cases where appearances conflict. For example, we take physical seemings to be more reliable than mnemonic seemings. Consider the following case:

If you have a memory of wearing a blue shirt yesterday, then it (mnemonically) seems to you that you were wearing a blue shirt yesterday. However, if you are now presented with a picture of yourself from yesterday, and you are wearing a green shirt in that picture, then it (perceptually) seems to you that you were wearing a green shirt yesterday. Given this disparity of seemings, any rational person would trust their perceptual seemings over their mnemonic seemings, as perceptual appearances are taken to be more reliable. Therefore, you should conclude that your mnemonic seeming was incorrect and reject it in favor of the physical seeming. Similar examples could be constructed to show that introspective seemings are more reliable than physical or mnemonic seemings, and so on. Through a lifetime of using appearances to build beliefs, we have learned that some types of appearances are consistently more reliable than others.

IIIb. Variable Reliability between Sub-Types of Seemings

Even within these types of seemings, one can draw further distinctions. For example, within perceptual appearances there are seemings of sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Some of these sub-types of appearances are also taken to be more reliable than others, just like the types of appearances discussed above. For example, if I saw someone shoot a gun, but I did not hear the rifle's report, I would rightly assume that I am experiencing some problem with my hearing, not with my vision. This distinction can also be made within intellectual seemings. Within intellectual appearances, Huemer cites both moral appearances and logical appearances (101). So, moral intuition and logical appearances are within the same type of seeming, but they are not identical. Just as taste and sight are both perceptual, but also quite distinct, so too are logical and moral seemings.

Thus, we take some appearances to be stronger and more reliable than other appearances. And through experience, we have learned that some types of appearances are routinely more reliable than others.

IIIc. Independence between Types of Seemings

Having shown that some seemings are judged to be more reliable than others, I now argue that if one type of seeming is brought into doubt, it can be rejected without necessarily rejecting other types of seemings. Here are a few examples to warrant this claim. Suppose a psychiatrist tells you that you have a form of amnesia by which your long-term memories become unreliable. You would therefore be justified in rejecting some of your mnemonic seemings. However, such a revelation would not also require you to abandon your rational or perceptual seemings. Even if your long-term mnemonic seemings are unreliable, you could still trust your intuition that the pan in front of you seems hot. You could therefore justifiably reject certain mnemonic seemings while maintaining certain perceptual seemings. Thus, in some instances, you could reasonably reject one type of seeming without rejecting all seemings. This claim is further vindicated by one of the most famous thought experiments in modern philosophy. Suppose that I am made aware, perhaps through the existence of an all-powerful and malevolent being, that all of my sense perception is nothing but a simulation designed to confound me. This gives me reason to doubt my sense perception, and I should therefore reject all perceptual and even mnemonic seemings. Yet, even in such an extreme case, I am not required to adopt complete skepticism. I would have no good reason to doubt my introspective seemings, and therefore no good reason to reject them. In this way, types of seemings are independent of one another. Given appropriate reasons, I could reject one type of appearance without rejecting all appearances.

This principle holds at the sub-type distinction of appearances as well. Within mnemonic appearances, there are short-term appearances and long-term appearances. A patient with early onset Alzheimer's has good reason to doubt their short-term seemings, but no good reason to doubt their long-term seemings. They could reasonably reject a sub-class of mnemonic appearances without rejecting all mnemonic appearances. Perceptual seemings also illustrate this claim well. My auditory seemings could be proven to be unreliable, but that would give me no good reason to doubt my visual or gustatory seemings. One sub-type of appearances could be rejected without rejecting the entire type. Therefore, if I had good reason, I could reject moral appearances without rejecting all intellectual appearances. And, if such a case were required, I could even reject all intellectual appearances without rejecting all other appearances.

In this way, we avoid the risk of global skepticism, and my objection still holds weight. *We should only believe our moral intuitions if we have no good reason to think that they are unreliable.* In the following section,

I argue that we do have good reason to doubt that moral seemings are a reliable subset of appearances.

Section IV: Some Reasons to Doubt

IVa. Menagerie of Errors

In the previous section, I demonstrated that certain types of appearances could be rejected without entailing global skepticism. I now argue my second point, namely, that we have good reason to doubt our moral intuitions as reliable grounds for forming beliefs. I return to the objection raised by the anti-intuitionist in Section II: there is a sizable list of potential error sources for our intuitions. I argue that most of Huemer's sources of error pose a more serious threat to moral intuitions than they do to other intuitions.

By way of reminder, Huemer believes that bias, hasty judgments, the intrinsic difficulty of issues, and other factors can corrupt any of our intuitions. However, moral appearances seem to be more susceptible to these factors than other types of seemings. For example, bias poses a bigger threat to the moral intuition "affirmative action seems immoral" than it does to "this apple appears green," "it seems that two points can be joined by a straight line," "I seem to be in pain," or "I seem to remember that song." Hasty judgments are more worrying when the judgment is "the death penalty seems morally permissible" than when the judgment is "my leg appears to be part of my body," "this pan seems hot," or "it seems that something cannot be all red and all blue in the same respect and at the same time." In this way, Huemer's "menagerie of errors" is more concerning for ethical intuitions than other forms of intuition. Bias, hasty judgments, and other threats affect moral intuitions more readily than perpetual, mnemonic, rational, or introspective intuitions.

Huemer acknowledges this point himself. He concedes that "sensory perceptions are...largely independent of our background beliefs," and that this is not the case for certain intellectual beliefs (104). Huemer also claims that error, and therefore disagreement, is more frequent in cases involving culture, tradition, religion, philosophy, or bias (141). Bias is "particularly important," because it acts as a catalyst for other errors, increasing their "frequency and seriousness" (140). Moral seemings are more commonly intertwined with culture, religion, and philosophy than are mnemonic, perceptual, or other intellectual seemings. In fact, many moral cases seem intrinsically linked to culture, religion, or philosophy. Other appearance

types do not have nearly as strong a connection to these factors. Therefore, according to Huemer's reasoning, ethical intuitions are more likely to yield "frequent and serious" errors than are other types of intuitions. Thus, we have good reason to believe that moral seemings are less reliable than other seemings.

Before moving on, I will briefly consider a potential objection. One could argue that the identification of these sources of error actually *increases* the reliability of moral seemings. If we can identify what makes our moral seemings untrustworthy, then we can avoid these mistakes and get trustworthy moral seemings. My rebuttal to this objection is two-pronged. First, as stated above, the list of errors that Huemer considers is non-exhaustive. Given the infinite intricacies of morality, it is unlikely that anyone would be able to identify every possible source of error in their moral intuitions. Second, simply knowing that an error exists is not enough to ensure that my intuitions are free from it. Even if I were able to identify all possible sources of error for my moral seemings, I would then have to ensure that none of these errors crept into my intuitions. This project seems impossible as well. Many sources of error, such as some biases or unarticulated assumptions, are unconscious. It is unclear how I would guard myself against errors I am unaware of. Thus, the sources of error remain a threat.

IVb. Verification

This "menagerie of errors," brings the reliability of moral appearances into question. Being able to verify our seemings would increase our confidence in their reliability. So, an anti-intuitionist could reasonably require the intuitionist to provide some way of verifying our moral intuitions. However, it does not seem possible to verify moral intuitions without relying on moral intuitions. Huemer claims that this objection is a double standard, for "it is doubtful that *all* of our non-moral knowledge can be checked" in the way the objector demands of moral intuition (109). However, I believe this objection is more potent than Huemer acknowledges. It may be true that not all non-moral intuitions can be externally verified, but surely *some* of our non-moral seemings can be. Conversely, it is not clear that *any* of our moral seemings are externally verifiable. Thus, there is a potential inequality here in terms of reliability.

For example, I can verify many of my mnemonic seemings with my perceptual seemings. Perhaps it seems to me (mnemonically) that I visited the zoo yesterday. I look at a photo from yesterday, and it also appears to me (perceptually) that I visited the zoo yesterday. In this way, I have

verified a mnemonic seeming with a perceptual seeming. Many of my rational appearances are likewise externally verified by sense perception. It seems to me (logically) that if line “B” is longer than line “A”, and line “C” is longer than line “B”, then line “C” is longer than line “A”. I can perceptually verify this logical seeming by measuring the lines. Or perhaps I am presented with the following disjunctive-elimination argument: The ball is either under cup A or cup B or cup C. The ball is not under cup C or cup B. So, the ball is under cup A. I can verify this logical seeming by checking under cup A. Thus, I can externally verify some logical seemings. Further, sense perceptions can be verified by other sense perceptions. If it seems to me (visually) that there is a cinnamon roll on the counter, I can verify this by smelling it, touching it, and tasting it. Moral seemings, on the other hand, cannot be checked in the ways that I have illustrated. Thus, because moral seemings are unverifiable in ways that other seemings are, we have less reason to be confident in their reliability.

IVc. Objectivity is Not the Best Explanation

Up until this point, I have treated moral realism as a background assumption. Huemer is a moral realist, and he argues for ethical intuitionism from this position. However, moral seemings do not imply moral realism. In fact, cultural norms seem to be a better explanation for our ethical intuitions than objective moral facts.

Suppose you round a corner in the supermarket and see a mother spanking her young daughter. You have the following ethical intuition: “That seems wrong.” On Huemer’s account, this provides *prima facie* justification for forming the belief “Spanking your child is wrong.” However, suppose I ask, “Why does that seem wrong?”. There are at least two possible answers to this question. First, you could take the moral realism route and respond, “It seems wrong because it *is* wrong.” I then ask, “How do you know that this is wrong?”. If you are both a moral realist and an intuitionist, your response may be along the lines of, “I know this is wrong because there is some objective moral fact that physically punishing a child is wrong, I have some intellectual faculty that allows me to “perceive” such moral facts, and this intellectual faculty allowed me to correctly identify this action as a moral wrong.” Or, you could take a relativistic approach and respond, “This seems wrong because it goes against my cultural norms.” This is clearly the simplest explanation, as it does not rely on any mysterious faculties or entities. I posit that most of our initial moral appearances are more easily explained by cultural norms than by objective moral truths. It is more likely that our moral seemings

track our cultural norms than objective moral facts. Therefore, if objective moral facts do exist, ethical intuitions are not likely to be the most reliable way to track them. Further, if an individual does hold a moral belief that differs from their cultural norms, they likely did not come to hold that belief because of an initial ethical appearance. The answer to “Why does this seem right (or wrong) to me?” is likely to be some combination of culture, experience, and bias.

If moral intuitions are best explained by cultural norms, Huemer’s theory is significantly weakened. Huemer argues that moral intuitions form a justified foundation for our moral beliefs. However, he also states that we should question whether we hold our moral beliefs because of “culture or religion” (144). According to Huemer, “we should be suspicious” of any moral belief that is influenced by religion or culture (144). He states that “a belief being endorsed by culture or religion is not evidence that it is false, but it *is* evidence that our belief is *unreliable*” (145). I argue that most of our moral intuitions are influenced by culture or religion. Therefore, if Huemer is correct, we have evidence that most of our moral intuitions are unreliable.

IVd. The Existence of Moral Seemings

Given that moral seemings would be prone to error, could not be verified, and may not be the best explanation for moral beliefs, it is not obvious that ethical intuitions exist at all. Huemer defines an intuition as “the way things seem prior to reasoning” (101). So, an ethical intuition is the way things seem morally, prior to reasoning. Yet, it is not clear that any such ethical intuition exists. Let us return to the spanking example. I see a mother discipline her child and think, “This seems wrong.” Huemer labels this as a moral seeming, and claims it occurred prior to reasoning. I argue that, at most, this occurred prior to conscious reasoning. However, some form of reasoning likely occurred. I propose that something like the following takes place. I see a woman spank a child. I know that spanking causes physical pain. I take it as a moral principle that causing a child physical pain is morally wrong. Thus, I conclude that spanking a child is morally wrong. In this way, the mother’s action seems wrong to me. This seeming is not prior to reasoning, even if my reasoning is not conscious.

This principle can be likened to looking at a clock. When I look at an analog clock, I know what time it is, even before I engage in any conscious reasoning. However, some form of reasoning is taking place. When I look at a clock, I reason unconsciously. I employ the following argument: If the hands are in *y* position, then it is *x* o’clock. The hands are

in y position. Therefore, it is x o'clock. According to Huemer's definition, I do not know the time intuitively because I had to reason my way to the appearance. It is plausibly the same with moral appearances. Some type of reasoning may proceed all of my ethical seemings. If this is true, then ethical seemings do not meet Huemer's definition of an intuition, and ethical intuitions do not exist.

Huemer's prior-to-reasoning definition for intuition affects some of our non-moral seemings as well. For example, if an apple seems green to me, I am likely engaging in some form of reasoning. I take it that anything within this shade is green, this apple is within this shade, therefore the apple is green. However, my objection does not do away with all intuitions. There are many appearances, such as "I seem to hear something" or "I seem to recognize that person" that are not subject to any reasoning, conscious or unconscious. So, we do not have reason to doubt the existence of *all* intuitions, but we may have reason to doubt some—including moral seemings.

Section V: Positive Sketches and Conclusion

In the previous sections, I have provided reasons to doubt Huemer's brand of ethical intuitionism. However, I do not argue that all forms of intuitionism should be rejected, and I do not argue that we should doubt moral realism generally. I simply argue that we have reasons to doubt that initial evaluative appearances are a reliable way of tracking objective moral truth, or a reliable way of forming justified moral beliefs. As shown above, Huemer's ethical intuitions are vulnerable to a plurality of errors, may not be verifiable, and are somewhat mysterious. Even if ethical intuitions do exist as he conceptualizes them, they are not widely reliable or even widely useful. Genuine moral intuitions would accurately account for only a small portion of our justified moral beliefs. Most of our ethical principles, if we wanted them to be reliable and to be based on moral fact, would have to be formed on some other basis.

The simplest solution for the intuitionist would be to change the definition of "intuition." Huemer's conception of intuition as an appearance prior to any reasoning is likely untenable. However, "appearance intuitionism" is not the only live option for the intuitionist. There is also the "rationalist intuition" camp (Tropman 475). The rationalists had their beginnings with W.D. Ross but have evolved past the initial Rossian conception of intuitionism (Tropman 476). The rational intuitionist could potentially define intuition as something like "unconscious reasoning."

This is distinct from Huemer's definition, and this conception of intuitions escapes the threat of ethical intuitions being non-existent.

Huemer would likely object to this theory on the following grounds: all of our moral reasoning has to start somewhere. Even if the reasoning is unconscious, I have some first principles that I am starting from. The appearance-intuitionist could claim that there is no way to decide these first principles other than moral intuitions. This is not necessarily the case. As argued above, it is unlikely that moral intuitions could track objective moral truths at all. If moral intuitions are unreliable, but moral realism is true, then we need another way to decide foundational moral propositions.

One potential answer to this problem is to take an axiomatic approach to morality. That is to say that there are fundamental, rational principles from which we can derive moral conclusions. This alternative to appearance-intuitionism is simply a sketch of a positive theory. This form of rational intuitionism may still be vulnerable to some of the objections posed above, and additional work would need to be done to produce a viable form of rational intuitionism. However, any positive suggestion is secondary to my argument in this paper.

I have attempted to prove that we have good reason to doubt Huemer's ethical intuitionism as reliable. I posited that we should only believe our intuitions if we have no good reason to disbelieve them. I offered multiple objections to show that we have good reason to disbelieve our moral seemings. Further, I have shown that such a claim can be made without entailing global skepticism. If there are objective moral truths, they must be discovered through some means other than appearance intuitionism.

Works Cited

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