

Towards a Phenomenological Defense of Moral Intuitionism: Articulating the Role of Consciousness

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A great deal has been written on both intuitionism and phenomenology, but far less has been written on the phenomenology of moral intuition (Audi 2022). Still less has been written on its relation to moral perception and moral experience in general. Phenomenology, however, can “support the view that intuitions are often discriminative responses to experience and have justificatory power analogous to the power of sense-perceptions” (Audi 2022). I suggest that phenomenology can advance the distinctive character of moral intuitionism, through the descriptive power of its epistemology. More particularly, I think an exploration of consciousness in particular is illuminating for moral intuitionism. The phenomenological exploration of consciousness by philosophers such as Edmund Husserl challenges conventional notions of perception by asserting that consciousness actively shapes the meaning of objects through intentional acts. This constitutive nature of consciousness, central to phenomenology, is marked by direct and immediate access to the essence of objects, a process termed intuition. This paper delves into Husserl’s phenomenological epistemology, emphasizing

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the methodological principle of presuppositionlessness of intuition. By drawing a connection between Husserl's *phenomenological* intuition and Huemer's *ethical* intuition, I suggest that we can draw out nuances to intuitionism that defend it against particular objections. Specifically, I will highlight how the unexplored phenomenological aspects of intuitionism, present in Husserl's phenomenological epistemology, has metaethical relevance and show that it provides a defense of how intuitionism can explain disagreement.

Edmund Husserl's Intuition

Edmund Husserl, in contrast to naturalistic or materialistic accounts of reality, which prioritize the external world as primary, places primacy on consciousness. Intuition is the means by which consciousness actively engages with and constitutes the world, revealing its essential structures and meanings. He, alongside other phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes that consciousness is not a neutral observer but actively constitutes the meaning of objects. These intentional acts of consciousness shape how we experience and understand the world, giving rise to what is known as the constitutive nature of consciousness. "The intentionality of consciousness," according to Husserl, "submits objects to consciousness, as to an *I* and by definition seeks access to that object" (54). This consciousness allows direct and immediate access to the essence of objects or phenomena, bypassing the need for intermediary steps or inferences. Intuition provides a way through which we directly engage with the essence of objects. This direct and non-inferential character of intuition is what grants it authority in the realm of knowledge. Husserl posits that intuition serves as a "source of authority for knowledge" and takes on the role of a "principle of principles" in phenomenology (54).

The Method of Presuppositionlessness

Husserl's phenomenological epistemology is a foundational framework that delves into the nature of knowledge by placing consciousness at the center of inquiry. The crux of his approach lies in the methodological principle of presuppositionlessness. This principle involves the suspension, or bracketing, of all preconceived notions, biases, and assumptions about the external world during the analysis of conscious experience. In his method of phenomenological reduction or epoché, Husserl advocated for suspending or bracketing all presuppositions and judgments about the existence of the external world. By doing so, one

can focus exclusively on the phenomena as they appear in consciousness, thereby gaining access to their pure essences through intuition. By setting aside these presuppositions, Husserl posits that one can engage in a direct exploration of consciousness that is unfettered by the influences of prior theories or interpretations (Joaquim 2010). This is the way by which a person can have direct access to the meaning of objects.

The process of presuppositionlessness is a radical reflection on experience, seeking to uncover the pure structures that underlie conscious phenomena. Intuition then, in the phenomenological context, is the means through which immediate, non-inferential access to the essence of objects is achieved. Through this intentional suspension of prejudgments, phenomenology aims to reveal the essential features of consciousness and the inherent structures that constitute knowledge. For Husserl, intuition serves as a source of authority for knowledge, a principle of principles in phenomenology. The methodological rigor of presuppositionlessness enables a more accurate and foundational understanding of reality by allowing one to examine the phenomena as they appear in consciousness.

Phenomenology as an Explanation for Moral Disagreement

Moral intuition parallels phenomenological intuition in that it involves immediate, pre-reflective apprehension of moral qualities in situations or actions, or the presuppositionlessness of our understanding of reality. Michael Huemer, the intuitionist to whose ideas, among others, I will be drawing comparisons, called this apprehension the “seemings” (Huemer 2007). Moreover, the constitutive nature of consciousness implies in this context that our moral intuitions are not arbitrary or detached; rather, they are shaped by the intentional acts that constitute the moral objects of our perception. This conception of intentionality of consciousness applied to metaethics can elaborate moral intuitionism in a way that illuminates and defends its legitimacy in response.

Particularly, phenomenological accounts of consciousness and intuition offer insights into how moral disagreement may arise, defending moral intuitionism against the objection that intuitionists cannot explain disagreement. Generally, the claim is that intuitionism makes it impossible to understand how moral error and moral disagreement can occur. Huemer’s response is that those who press this claim mistake the nature of intuition to mean a kind of “infallibilistic caricature” (Huemer 2008, 237). Huemer’s response is to say that those who object are wrong in four ways: First, they typically exaggerate the amount of disagreement and error that exists. Second, human error and disagreement are common with respect

to many objective, factual questions. Third, human beings are subject to a great variety of causes of error. Lastly, if we were to consider what kinds of issues people disagree about most, it is easily the case that moral matters would be among those (Huemer 2008, 237–8).

I am in agreement with Huemer’s replies to these objections, but I will here utilize Husserl’s notion of the intentionality of consciousness (his conception of intuition) to defend intuitionism against this particular objection, and say that an intuitionist can explain disagreement. We can understand the phenomenological intuitionist’s explanation for moral disagreement through three points: a) Different individuals may engage in unique intentional acts, leading to varied constructions of moral meaning. b) This intentional structure affects the salience of different moral aspects, contributing to variations in moral intuitions. This foregrounding and backgrounding influence the moral content that becomes salient to each individual, contributing to the diversity of moral intuitions. c) Individuals may rely on different rational frameworks, leading to distinct interpretations of moral situations and varied moral intuitions, since “the rationality of thought dictates the rules of our perception” (Huemer 2008). From these different phenomenological accounts of moral intuitionism, we can conclude that disagreements may arise when individuals with differing moral intuitions encounter situations where their intentional acts construct divergent moral meanings.

Diversity in Intentional Acts

To the first point, the diversity in intentional acts, as emphasized by phenomenology, results in varied constructions of moral meaning among individuals. Intentional acts, the directedness of consciousness toward objects, differ from person to person, influencing how moral aspects are prioritized in ethical situations. All intentionality involves a *presentation*, or in some sense, an *appearance* of an object (including mere imaginings or thoughts). To this neutral appearance of an object one may then add a committal attitude towards it—of either judgment or emotion—each of which takes positive and negative forms: in judgment, one either affirms or denies the presented object; in *emotion*, one either likes or dislikes it, values or disvalues it (Siewart 2022). It is more than just a mere presentation, since the object appears due to a directedness of attention. Intentionality is the *directedness* or *reference* of mind to things, objects, states of affairs, events. So, if you are thinking about San Francisco, or about the cost of living there, or about meeting someone at Union Square—your mind, your thinking, is directed toward San Francisco and these other

things (Siewart 2022). This individualized intentional structure shapes the seemings of phenomenal conservatism, contributing to distinct moral intuitions and interpretations.

Salience of Moral Values

Secondly, the intentional structure affects the salience of different moral aspects, shaping the moral dimensions. To go back to the San Francisco example—if you are thinking about moving to San Francisco, but you are concerned about your budget most of all, you are likely to find that you direct your mind most frequently and most anxiously toward the cost of living in San Francisco, where it might be cheapest to live, how to spare money in the move, etc. (Siewart 2022). This consideration, however, does not have any obvious moral weight, but at least illustrates a kind of foregrounded and backgroundedness. The intentional structure of consciousness as the makeup of intuition, in the matter of ethics, does the same thing. It influences what is foregrounded and backgrounded in the moral landscape, determining which elements become particularly noticeable or significant to an individual. This process contributes to the nuanced construction of moral meaning and the development of unique moral intuitions. Thus, different individuals, driven by their distinct intentional acts, may prioritize diverse facets of an ethical scenario. Consequently, the moral content that becomes salient varies from person to person, leading to a rich array of moral intuitions.

Differing Rational Frameworks

Lastly, individuals may rely on different rational frameworks, leading to distinct interpretations of moral situations and varied moral intuitions, since “the rationality of thought dictates the rules of our perception.” The intentional acts of consciousness shape and are shaped by individual rational frameworks and thus significantly influence how individuals perceive and interpret moral situations. The rationality of thought, as asserted by Husserl, establishes formal logical and ontological principles that dictate what can be intended in any conceivable intention, thereby influencing the potential for intuitive fulfillment. This contributes to a diversity of moral interpretations. Each rational framework establishes its own set of criteria, principles, and values that guide moral reasoning and judgment. Consequently, individuals with distinct rational frameworks may approach the same moral situation with varied perspectives, emphasizing different moral aspects based on their cognitive structures.

For example, individuals with utilitarian frameworks may prioritize consequences and overall well-being in their moral assessments, leading to specific intuitions regarding the greater good. Conversely, those adhering to deontological principles may focus on duty and moral rules, shaping different intuitions about the rightness or wrongness of actions. The intentional acts influenced by these varied rational frameworks contribute to the diversity of moral intuitions, highlighting the nature of ethical perception within phenomenology.

Given these three ways by which we can rightly suppose that the phenomenology of perceptions accounts for differences in moral intuition, we can therefore say that disagreements may arise when individuals with differing moral intuitions encounter situations where their intentional acts construct divergent moral meanings. This assertion draws on the interplay between intentional acts, which construct the meaning of moral objects, shaping the foregrounding and backgrounding of particular aspects. Consequently, when individuals with differing moral intuitions engage with the same situation, their intentional acts lead to the construction of divergent moral meanings.

Let us construct an example of how this might play out, envisioning a scenario in which individuals are gathered at a table and are discussing concerns related to environmental ethics. Person *A* is an experienced economist and as such foregrounds human needs and economic considerations with a focus on job creation and economic growth. Drawing from her rational framework grounded in utilitarian principles, she argues that responsible development can enhance human well-being and prosperity. Person *A*'s intentional acts, as constructed throughout her economic career, during the discussion emphasize the economic benefits of the proposed development project, such as increased employment opportunities and financial gains for the community. Opposite person *A* is person *B*, an environmental scientist, who emphatically emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and ecological preservation. Guided by an eco-centric ethical framework, person *B*'s intentional acts, constructed throughout his career, direct attention to the environmental impact of the proposed project, highlighting potential harm to local ecosystems, biodiversity, and the long-term health of the planet. Person *B* contends that nature has inherent value beyond its utility to humans and insists on the moral duty to protect it. As the conversation unfolds, person *A*'s intentional structure leads her to interpret the situation through an economic lens, emphasizing the potential benefits for human well-being. In contrast, person *B*'s intentional acts prioritize the intrinsic value of nature, foregrounding environmental considerations. The disagreement

between these specific viewpoints, rooted in distinct intentional acts and rational frameworks, underscores the divergence in moral perspectives.

The intentional directedness of consciousness implies that certain aspects of a moral situation may be foregrounded while others are backgrounded. This intentional structure influences what aspects of the moral situation become salient and consequently, how we intuitively respond to the moral content. Rationality establishes the formal logical and ontological principles governing what can be intended in any conceivable intention, thereby dictating the potential for intuitive fulfillment. The rationality of thought dictates the rules of our perception, according to Husserl.

Relativism as an Objection to the Phenomenology of Moral Intuitionism

An objection to the phenomenological framework of intuitionism, particularly in the context of moral realism, centers on the concern that emphasizing the constitutive nature of consciousness may lead to subjectivity and relativism. Moral intuitionists firmly adhere to the idea of moral realism, positing that evaluative statements convey objective truths that are not merely subjective or relative. According to moral intuitionism, certain moral facts exist independently of individual perspectives, and we can justify our belief in the truth of evaluative statements through rational intuition, which provides a direct apprehension of moral truths. In contrast, the phenomenological claims might be perceived as promoting an anti-realist view by seemingly removing the necessity for objectivity within morality. The emphasis on the constitutive nature of consciousness might be misunderstood as advocating for a purely subjective and relativistic understanding of moral values. However, this potential misinterpretation overlooks the nuanced relationship between phenomenological consciousness and moral intuitionism.

To address this objection, it is important to recognize that while phenomenology highlights the subjective and intentional nature of consciousness, it does not imply a denial of objective moral truths. Instead, phenomenology seeks to describe the perceptual experience that individuals undergo when making moral judgments. In this sense, the phenomenological account of intuitionism does not propose that “seemings” are an ultimate and infallible authority in determining moral truths. Rather, it underscores the richness and complexity of the individual’s perceptual experience in moral reasoning. Intuitionism, according to Huemer (2008), is “our means of cognizing moral truths”

(211). In a similar vein, the phenomenological account of intuitionism does not suggest that we are appealing to seemings as the ultimate, infallible authority, but describes the perceptual experience that occurs for the individual making a moral judgment. In describing the perceptual experience, we can provide a defensible account of how disagreement arises given the stance of an intuitionist. That is to say, an intuitionist, with phenomenological description as endowed by Husserl, can account for disagreement.

Conclusion

In exploring the intersection of phenomenology and moral intuitionism, I suggest that consciousness, as understood through phenomenological lenses, shapes our moral perceptions. Edmund Husserl's emphasis on the constitutive nature of consciousness reveals that intentional acts actively mold the meaning of objects, a process that I compare to moral intuition in ethics. By examining Husserl's phenomenological epistemology alongside Michael Huemer's ethical intuitionism, this paper elucidates how the intentional structure of consciousness and diverse rational frameworks contribute to divergent moral intuitions and interpretations. The phenomenological insight underscores that moral disagreements arise from individualized intentional acts constructing varied moral meanings. Despite objections claiming subjectivity and relativism are inherent in phenomenology, the phenomenological framework does not negate the existence of objective moral truths. Rather, it offers a description of the perceptual experience guiding moral judgments, supporting intuitionism's stance that moral truths can be cognized through intuition. Ultimately, this synthesis of phenomenological insights and ethical intuitionism provides a robust defense, informing our understanding of moral disagreement while affirming the validity of moral intuition within the realm of ethical discourse.

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