SHOULD MORAL INTUITIONISM GO SOCIAL? [1]

Marvin Backes
Uppsala University

Matti Eklund
Uppsala University

Eliot Michaelson
King's College London

Abstract: In recent work, Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2020) develop a new social version of moral intuitionism that promises to explain why our moral intuitions are trustworthy. In this paper, we raise several worries for their account and present some general challenges for the broader class of views we call *Social Moral Intuitionism*. We close by reflecting on Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau's comparison between what they call the "perceptual practice" and the "moral intuition practice", which we take to raise some difficult normative and meta-normative questions for theorists of all stripes.

1. Introduction

According to moral realists, broadly speaking, there exists a domain of mind or stance-independent moral truths which determine whether a moral judgment is true or false. One notorious challenge for moral realists is to explain how we may come to know what the moral truths are. *Moral intuitionism* promises to answer this question. The core doctrine of moral intuitionism is that we can know at least some basic moral principles intuitively. A pressing concern for moral intuitionists is to explain why we should think that our moral intuitions are in good epistemic standing. According to some prominent—though controversial—answers to this question, our moral intuitions are trustworthy because basic moral principles are *self-evident* or because, in the absence of defeaters, it's permissible to trust that things are the way they *seem* to us.[2] Notably, these standard replies have largely focused on various features of the intuitions of individual agents.

In recent work, Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2020, hereafter just 'BCS') seek to challenge this orthodoxy. They set out to defend the trustworthiness of our moral

---

[1] Names appear in alphabetical order; all authors contributed equally.
[2] The former view has been defended most notably by Audi (2004, 2008); the second kind of view has been defended by Huemer (2005).

intuitions not by focusing on individual agents, but by emphasizing the social dimension of our moral intuition practice. This, we take it, is in keeping with a more general trend in epistemology and, indeed, philosophy more broadly which has seen an increasing interest in the social aspects of various philosophical notions and phenomena. More specifically, BCS claim that, when it comes to moral intuitions:

> [O]ur argument appeals to the idea that moral intuitions are trustworthy because they are the outputs of a cognitive practice, which has epistemically-fecund social elements, that is in good working order. (p. 956)[3]

A bit later, they clarify that:

> [W]hile standard defenses of moral intuitionism focus on properties of the moral intuitional states of individual thinkers or agents, the version of moral intuitionism for which we'll argue emphasizes a range of features, with social dimensions, of the practice of intuiting (p. 957).

This paper uses BCS's account to highlight some challenges regarding the move of, so to speak, "going social". More specifically, we raise a number of worries for BCS's new social approach to moral intuitionism and argue that these objections are likely to generalize to other social versions of moral intuitionism.

The plan is as follows. In section 2, we briefly outline how BCS think certain social features can help establish the trustworthiness of our moral intuitions. Section 3 argues that the social aspects of BCS's account don't in fact play any load-bearing role in their argument and shows why this worry will likely generalize to other versions of social moral intuitionism. Section 4 raises doubts about whether social versions of moral intuitionism (as envisioned by BCS) offer any epistemic advantages over their more traditional individualistic competitors. This, we argue, threatens to leave the move of going social unmotivated. In section 5 we explore whether BCS's appeal to a social moral intuition "practice" might serve to mitigate our earlier worries. The answer, we argue, is "no". Not only that, but there is in fact reason to doubt whether BCS's background

---

[3] All page references are to Bengson, Cuneo, and Schafer-Landau (2020) unless otherwise noted.

assumptions regarding practices license their talking of a social "moral intuition practice" in the first place. Finally, in section 6, we argue that even if there does exist something like a "moral intuition practice", this practice would be significantly different from other cognitive practices that we generally do take to be in good epistemic standing—e.g. perception. Interestingly, the disanalogies between our perceptual practice and our alleged moral intuition practice also point toward some fascinating and under-appreciated questions for normative and meta-normative theorizing more broadly.

2. Moral Intuitions and Trustworthiness

At the heart of BCS's social version of moral intuitionism lies what they call the "Trustworthiness Criterion", which makes use of the notion of a cognitive practice being in "good working order".[4]

> **The Trustworthiness Criterion:** If a cognitive practice P is in good working order, then P's outputs are trustworthy for participants in P, provided these outputs (a) are not massively and systemically inconsistent with each other, and (b) positively cohere (e.g., bear explanatory and inferential relations) with one another.[5] (p. 963)

Throughout the paper, BCS's primary aim is to show that the "moral intuition practice" is indeed in good working order and meets conditions (a) and (b). Taking themselves to have succeeded at this, they conclude that the moral intuition practice—and, by extension, its outputs—are trustworthy.[6]

At this point one might wonder where the alleged social dimension of the account is to be located. The social aspects of the account become apparent once we look at how BCS explicate the notion of being in "good working order", which together with conditions (a) and (b) is sufficient for a cognitive practice to be trustworthy. When is a

---

[4] BCS understand trustworthiness in terms of warranted cognitive reliance, "[f]or φ to be worthy of trust by an agent is for φ to be such that the agent is warranted in cognitively relying on it...Thus, trustworthiness is warranted cognitive reliance." (p. 958)

[5] Note: conditions (a) and (b) are BCS's (v.a) and (vi.a) and are given earlier, at pp. 962-63. We have substituted these conditions into the definition for increased readability.

[6] We would note, briefly, that we're not entirely clear on how BCS envision their notion of *trustworthiness* relating to other important epistemic notions, like *justification*. Are trustworthy outputs pro tanto justified, or justified in the absence of defeaters? We aren't sure, since BCS never say. What's clear is that trustworthiness is an epistemic goody worth having, but just what sort or epistemic goody it is and how it figures into broader justificatory projects remains to be seen.

cognitive practice in good working order? According to BCS, a practice is in good working order when it:

(i) is socially well-established: there is broad participation by members of the community over time;

(ii) is deeply entrenched: participation in the practice is to some extent "second nature," where in the limit case recurrent participation is practically inescapable or indispensable;

(iii) makes available sophisticated methods of critically evaluating its outputs (including procedures for detecting and to some extent correcting errors or infelicities among its outputs, standards for legitimate appeal to a community of putative experts, and acknowledged criteria for reliability or infelicity), which are readily employed by those engaging in the practice in a serious and competent way;

(iv) engenders achievement: it enables apparently successful engagement in substantive practical and theoretical projects among those engaging in the practice in a serious and competent way (by, inter alia, helping them to make accurate predictions, to enforce some control over their environment, and to pursue socially meaningful ends);

(v) is internally harmonious: for those engaging in the practice in a serious and competent way, it yields outputs that (a) are not massively and systemically inconsistent with each other, and (b) positively cohere (e.g., bear explanatory and inferential relations) with one another; [and…]

(vi) is externally harmonious: its outputs (a) are not massively and systemically inconsistent with, and (b) in fact positively cohere well with, the outputs of a sufficiently wide range of other cognitive practices in working order.[7] (pp. 962-63)

The next section focuses on the social elements encoded in conditions (i) and (ii) of BCS's account and argues that it is unclear what their epistemic significance is supposed to be.

---

[7] Note that these are merely jointly sufficient conditions; none is claimed to be necessary. Also, note that conditions (v.a) and (vi.a) are repeated in the definition of the Trustworthiness Criterion, meaning that they are both necessary for trustworthiness (per the definition) and part of a set of sufficient conditions for a practice's being in good working order. Since BCS are open to there being other conditions that would suffice for an epistemic practice to be in good working order, this repetition is not redundant (p. 963).

Then we argue that analogous concerns are likely to apply to other social versions of moral intuitionism.

3. The Social

BCS repeatedly stress the supposed importance of the fact that the moral intuition practice is a social one. Indeed, this is supposed to be one of the primary differentia between their account and earlier versions of moral intuitionism. However, in order for the account to succeed in fulfilling their stated aims, it would be necessary for them to show how the social features embedded in their account help establish the claim that our moral intuitions are in good epistemic standing.

BCS home in on social cognitive practices primarily via their conditions (i) and (ii). Together (i) and (ii) ensure that any practice under consideration is "deeply social", in the sense that it is a long-established social practice. But BCS never make clear why either of these elements should be relevant when it comes to establishing a practice's epistemic trustworthiness.

Suppose that Albert has developed a novel, reliable method for identifying different strains of coronavirus, but he has shared this method only with his lab. Let us stipulate that all of (iii)-(vi) are all satisfied with respect to the cognitive practice of identifying virus strains via Albert's methods, but contra (ii) the practice is not yet second nature to anyone (Albert included). Rather, everyone (including Albert) must run through a checklist in order to carry out this complex method of identification or any of the checks that can be subsequently invoked. Is the practice somehow epistemically worse off as a result? We can see no reason for thinking that it is. On the contrary, once individuals internalize the process, they may well become sloppier in implementing it and more prone to making mistakes. In fact, we can see no reason to think that it matters whether Albert has shared this method with his lab or whether he is engaged in this identificatory project alone. In short, it is not at all clear what essential role sociality—the fulfilment of (i) and (ii)—is supposed to play in establishing that a cognitive practice is, epistemically speaking, in good working order and therefore trustworthy.

To be clear, we agree with BCS that our own moral intuition practice, or perhaps our moral judgment practice more broadly, is a deeply social one. But we are unable to see what difference this makes to the epistemic standing of that practice. Indeed, it seems that the social aspects of their account can be stripped away without any ill effect.

This worry will apply equally well to other versions of social moral intuitionism. So long as one aims to establish the trustworthiness of our moral intuitions by appeal to social features like broad social participation or a practice's deep social entrenchment, one will need to explain why these features are epistemically significant and, more specifically, why those features in particular serve to render a practice trustworthy.

In the next section we consider whether BCS's social version of moral intuitionism offers new resources for answering the main epistemic challenge previously levelled against traditional versions of moral intuitionism.

4. The Truth-Connection Challenge

One of the central challenges for moral intuitionists of all stripes is to explain why we can/should be confident that our moral intuitions reliably track the mind-independent moral facts. Call this the "Truth-Connection Challenge". Accordingly, it is an important question whether social versions of moral intuitionism offer new resources for responding to this challenge. If they don't, then it is not clear what exactly the motivations for going social are supposed to be and why Social Moral Intuitionism should be preferred to its main individualistic competitors, such as Audi's (2004, 2008) *Self-Evidence View* or Huemer's (2005) *Seemings View*.

BCS's account might initially seem to be ill-situated to meet this challenge. After all, their definition of trustworthiness requires only that the cognitive practice under consideration be in good working order and, as we have seen, their account of "being in good working order" focuses primarily on epistemic features like consistency and coherence rather than reliability or truth. To evaluate their suggestion regarding the moral intuition practice, however, we need to focus on the particular way they take that practice to be in good working order. So, having already considered the epistemic relevance of their conditions (i) and (ii), in this section we will turn to conditions (iii)-(vi) to see whether any of these can help BCS meet the Truth-Connection Challenge.

First, though, it is worth considering whether BCS might be able to side-step the Truth-Connection Challenge entirely. One strategy for doing so would be to simply deny that trustworthiness is constitutively connected to getting things right. But we don't think that can plausibly be BCS's position, given some of the things they say in spelling out conditions (iii) and (iv), to which we will return shortly. What's more, we take it that such a claim—that a cognitive practice's being trustworthy is in no sense constitutively tied to

the likelihood of the outputs of that cognitive practice to be true—is a fairly radical one. So if BCS intended to urge us towards such a position, we would have expected to see an argument for this claim. We have been unable to identify one.[8]

We will therefore assume that BCS intend to offer us some new resources to meet the Truth-Connection Challenge. The question thus becomes: where in their view might we locate these resources? We turn now to their conditions (iii)-(vi) with an eye towards uncovering some sort of response to this challenge.

We begin by considering conditions (v) and (vi), which ensure internal consistency amongst the outputs of the practice, positive coherence amongst those outputs, and consistency and coherence between those outputs and the outputs of other cognitive practices in good working order. In a nutshell, these conditions on outputs ensure that the outputs of the moral intuition practice meet with what we might call "broadly coherentist scruples", as urged on us by a range of earlier theorists.[9] According to coherentists, the relevant epistemic good-making feature of a belief is its coherence with other beliefs and, as such, accuracy or reliability may be viewed as not being amongst the primary concerns of coherentists. BCS take the outputs of the moral intuition practice to be non-doxastic and their (v) and (vi) take account of consistency and coherence amongst a broader range of "outputs", but the basic idea here still seems to be very much the same as it would be for any orthodox version of coherentism.[10]

In terms of answering the Truth-Connection Challenge, this appeal to consistency and coherence will not do. After all, coherentism is generally unpopular amongst moral theorists and epistemologists precisely because there doesn't appear to be a particularly robust connection between coherence and truth.[11] For instance, one can easily imagine a perfectly consistent moral monster.[12] For reasons like this, coherence alone is generally considered to be insufficient to show that a given set of beliefs has the right sort of

---

[8] It is also worth noting that both Huemer and Audi explicitly take themselves to be addressing the Truth-Connection Challenge. So, if BCS think that moral intuitionists can simply refuse to answer the Truth-Connection Challenge, then it is unclear why we should prefer social moral intuitionism to its individualistic cousins. After all, intuitionists of all stripes should be able to avail themselves of this move.

[9] See, for instance, BonJour (1985), Lehrer (1990), Sayre-McCord (1996), Thagard (2000).

[10] We would note in passing that we are not exactly certain how BCS envision measuring the consistency of a doxastic and non-doxastic state. Is an intuition that p inconsistent with a belief that not-p? BCS never address this issue.

[11] See, for instance, Huemer (1997), Olsson (2005), Setiya (2012), and Tersman (2018, sect. 2).

[12] Nor is the social analogue of the consistent moral monster difficult to conceive of. Just consider a slightly more consistent version of the social moral intuition practice described in a given dystopian novel—for instance, the men of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

connection to truth; something more seems to be required. But conditions (iv) and (v) fail to move beyond the claim that the outputs of the moral intuition practice must meet with the scruples of earlier versions of coherentism. So we must look elsewhere in their view for a response to the Truth-Connection Challenge.

Now we return to conditions (iii) and (iv). Recall that condition (iii) states that a cognitive practice must "[make] available sophisticated methods of critically evaluating its outputs." (p. 962) "Critical evaluation" certainly sounds promising. But, as we will see, BCS's elaboration on this condition reveals this hope to be misplaced. BCS note five methods of critical evaluation which they take to be relevant to the case of moral intuitions. We will consider each of these in turn.

The first method they offer is itself really three: test for consistency, establish corroboration, and pursue confirmation. We'll set aside consistency and corroboration, since the former corresponds to intrapersonal coherence and the latter to interpersonal coherence. What of confirmation though? BCS claim that, in the moral case at least, confirmation amounts to "checking whether our moral intuitions imply absurdities or repugnancies." (p. 969) If absurdities are understood as contradictions and repugnancies are themselves outputs of the moral intuition practice, then, so far as we can tell, this is just disguised talk of internal consistency. And, for the reasons discussed above, consistency alone is insufficient to establish the trustworthiness of our moral intuitions.

The second method is to certify that participants in the practice are in good conditions for the production of outputs (p. 970). But we cannot see how this does anything to ensure a robust connection to reality. After all, practitioners of astrology can be drunk or sober, but the outputs of the practice are going to veer away from truth either way.

The third method is to reflect on moral exemplars, those who are widely acknowledged by the community to be moral (p. 971). But again, one can have widely agreed exemplars in highly inaccurate practices, and reflecting on their concepts, patterns of attention, etc. is not going to do anything to help make the outputs of that practice any more accurate. Consider again astrology, which is full of exemplars.

The fourth method concerns experiments of living, or trying out different ways of being in order to experience what they are like (pp. 971-72). However, we do not see how engaging in such "experiments" might help to ensure the accuracy of our moral intuition practice. And BCS never elaborate on what they mean by this.

Fifth, and finally, there is the method of reflecting on our moral concepts (p. 972). In investigating this possibility, BCS explain how we might come to realize that some of our moral concepts are thick, incorporating both a descriptive and evaluative component. While we are happy to grant this, we are once more at a loss to see how engaging in this method of critical reflection can help to secure the accuracy of our moral intuition practice. After all, the alchemical concept ANTIMONY plausibly incorporated both a descriptive and evaluative component which alchemists might well have worked out via reflection. As best we can tell, however, such reflection would not have made the alchemical cognitive practice any more accurate.

So much for condition (iii). What about condition (iv)? That was the condition that the cognitive practice in question

> engenders achievement: it enables apparently successful engagement in substantive practical and theoretical projects among those engaging in the practice in a serious and competent way (by, inter alia, helping them to make accurate predictions, to enforce some control over their environment, and to pursue socially meaningful ends). (p. 962)

BCS claim that "the moral intuitions of serious and competent agents…will…enable the development of a sound moral character, which, in fortunate circumstances, will in turn help (inter alia) to sustain loving relationships, to earn the trust of others, and to cultivate the capacity for sympathy and empathy" (p. 973). We take it that such loving relationships, trusting relationships, and the capacity for sympathy and empathy are supposed to be examples of the achievements engendered by our moral intuition practice. But even if our moral intuitions do somehow enable these achievements, none of this speaks directly to their accuracy or reliability, for it is hardly obvious that any of these types of practical achievements track truth. By way of contrast, we take it that if one can use a scientific theory to control the environment—and particularly if one can exert such control in relatively fine-grained ways—that does provide at least some reason to believe in the accuracy of the theory.

Perhaps anticipating this point, BCS go on to say that the moral intuition practice also "enables us to engage in apparently successful theoretical inquiry" (p. 973). Elaborating, they claim that "it is difficult to imagine making headway in normative ethics without

relying on the moral intuitions of serious and competent moral agents" (pp. 973-74). We take them to mean that by relying on these intuitions we do make headway, or at least appear to make headway, in normative ethics. But they do not elaborate on this claim, and "making headway" could mean a number of different things here. One way to make headway is to come closer to a reflective equilibrium, or to get clearer on the consequences of various assumptions and on what is compatible with what. Normative ethics does appear to make headway in that sense. But this sort of making headway does not without further ado entail anything about accurately tracking mind-independent, non-conditional moral facts.

If, by contrast, BCS mean to claim that normative ethics appears to make headway in the sense of coming closer to tracking truth, one might have expected to see an argument for this. After all, while there is widespread agreement about certain matters in normative ethics, there remains significant disagreement on other matters (e.g. whether one is permitted to save the few as opposed to the many). What's more, in metaethics, there are substantive arguments against conflating even widespread moral agreement with moral truth (cf. Mackie 1977, Gibbard 1990, Joyce 2001). As things stand, it appears that BCS simply assume that we are making progress or "headway" in normative ethics. But assuming that this is the case without ruling out the possibility that our moral beliefs are widely and systematically mistaken, we worry, amounts to little more than begging the question against opponents of moral intuitionism.

Hence, BCS's account—the leading version of Social Moral Intuitionism currently available—does not appear to offer any new resources for addressing moral intuitionism's main obstacle: the Truth-Connection Challenge. This again points towards a more general challenge for social versions of moral intuitionism. To motivate their views, proponents of Social Moral Intuitionism will need to show that their views are somehow better positioned to answer the main objections against moral intuitionism than are its more traditional individualistic rivals. Unless this can be done, it's just not clear what the advantages of social versions of moral intuitionism are supposed to be. The next section shifts the focus to the notion of "cognitive practices" and raises doubts about whether there exists anything like a social "moral intuition practice" in the first place.

5. Practices

According to BCS, one essential feature of social moral intuitionism is a shift away from thinking primarily about the moral intuitional states of individual thinkers towards thinking about moral intuiting as a wider social practice. BCS call this cognitive practice the "moral intuition practice". While BCS never explicitly define the notion of a practice, they offer a number of examples. In addition to the "perceptual practice", which we already mentioned above, they offer by way of example:

> the mnemonic practice (whose outputs include memory states), the introspective practice (whose outputs include introspective states), the arithmetic practice (whose outputs include judgments regarding sums), and the scientific practice (whose outputs include experimental observations, explanatory hypotheses, statistical analyses, and more). (p. 961)

Later they also mention the "astrological practice" (p. 964). Note that some of these practices would appear to be individualistic (e.g. the perceptual and mnemonic practices), whereas others are more plausibly social (e.g. the scientific and astrological practices). So by BCS's lights, practices aren't inherently social.

Strikingly, some of these practices seem to be identified in terms of how the supposed knowledge is yielded—by perception, memory, and introspection—whereas others are identified by topics—such as arithmetic and astronomy. The "moral intuition practice," in contrast, is identified both by its topic— morality—and via its supposed source— intuitions—where intuitions are themselves the "*non-doxastic* bases" of doxastic states like moral beliefs and judgments (p. 958). So it is an outlier with respect to all of the other practices noted by BCS. This raises the possibility of this way of identifying the practice being worryingly ad hoc.

And, indeed, we think that there is reason for concern. Note that if we were to identify the relevant practice simply in terms of its subject matter, morality, then the relevant cognitive practice would almost assuredly include as its outputs various *doxastic* states (e.g. moral beliefs) in addition to moral intuitions. So, arguing for the trustworthiness of that practice wouldn't serve to vindicate moral intuitionism.

In contrast, if we were to identify the relevant practice by its source or method—i.e. our intuition practice in general—then it becomes far less clear that the outputs of that practice will positively cohere with the outputs of various of our other cognitive practices

in good working order. For instance, it is highly dubitable whether the outputs of our intuition practice as regards physics cohere at all with the outputs of our contemporary academic physics practice. And the latter is surely in good working order if anything is. So we should ask: are BCS justified in identifying this particular cognitive practice— i.e. the moral intuition practice—by means of both its subject matter and methodology?

We suspect they are not. Our cognitive practice of intuition in general doesn't have a particularly stellar record for trustworthiness (just reflect for a moment on what physics and biology looked like when they were based primarily on intuition). So one might reasonably have hoped for some explanation of why, in contrast to our intuition practice in general, the moral intuition practice in particular is trustworthy.[13] Consider how unsatisfying it would be for someone to hold—without explanation of the salient differences between perception of color and other sorts of perception—that perception is generally untrustworthy, but that the perception of color is trustworthy.[14]

One might also suspect that our moral intuition practice cannot be teased apart from our broader practice of moral judgment as cleanly as BCS make out to be. So, for instance, one might suspect that the moral intuitions we have causally depend upon the moral beliefs we have.[15] Indeed, one might go so far as to posit that our moral intuitions are often mere epiphenomenal side-effect of our (deeply-held) moral beliefs. Identifying cognitive practices in terms of subject matter allows us to avoid such worries by remaining neutral about the particular mechanisms involved. Identifying cognitive practices in terms of mechanisms that are well-attested to in psychology is more committal, but the justification for the particular practices is at least clear. The problem with talking about a practice of moral intuitions is that it commits us to there being a distinct practice of moral intuiting that we can carve off from the rest of our social practice of thinking and talking about morality. But BCS offer us no positive reasons for thinking that it is possible to do so.

---

[13] This is not to impugn the reliability of all forms of intuition; intuition is probably highly reliable among experts in certain domains (chess, for instance). See Chudnoff (2020) for discussion.

[14] BCS might insist that they are using "intuition" in a narrower sense than we are understanding it here, such that some of what we would describe as "intuition in general"— including, in particular, the biological and physical intuitions alluded to in our argument—simply do not fall under that heading. But while a move like this might serve to avoid the objection as phrased, it raises another, equally pressing, concern: how can we reasonably assess the track record of intuitions in this narrower sense?

[15] Indeed, insofar as we might count moral perception as a type of moral intuition, Faraci (2015), Väyrynen (2018) and Reiland (2021) have recently argued that such perception depends on antecedently held moral judgments.

So, we are not convinced that there really is a social moral intuition practice to speak of, as opposed to just a moral practice—or perhaps moral judgment practice—that intuitions may sometimes figure into. Before we can assess whether our "moral intuition practice" is trustworthy, proponents of Social Moral Intuitionism first need to show that there exists such a social practice to begin with.

6. Perception, Intuition and Evolution

Let us lastly, as promised, return to the analogy between perception and intuition. On BCS's account, the moral intuition practice is simply one cognitive practice among many. This way of thinking about our moral intuitions—as one cognitive practice among many—immediately raises questions about the significance of cross-cognitive practice comparisons. In particular, it is tempting to look at the conditions under which some cognitive practices are generally trustworthy and to see whether this might yield any insights about the conditions under which we can expect other cognitive practices to be trustworthy. In this section, we argue that comparing the moral intuition practice to other cognitive practices—e.g. the perception practice—is much more of a mixed bag than BCS take it to be. Taking seriously the comparison will in fact make salient some further reasons to doubt the trustworthiness of our moral intuition practice, reasons which are interestingly different from the sorts of broader skeptical projects more common to metaethical theorizing.

BCS explicitly compare the moral intuition practice to the perceptual practice in the context of defending the claim that, sometimes, even a cognitive practice in good working order will yield some incompatible outputs. In defense of this claim, BCS cite the perceptual practice, which, they claim, sometimes yields incompatible attributions of color.[16] As they put it:

> [S]erious and competent perceivers sometimes disagree about the way things look or what color they are. Still, such disagreement is not massive and systemic, but is limited in its scope and in many cases can be resolved—sometimes

---

[16] Note that there are any number of metaphysical positions on the nature of color according to which prima facie incompatible attributions like "being red" and "being green" turn out not to be incompatible ultima facie. See, for instance, Kalderon (2007) and Cohen (2009).

straightforwardly—through further participation in the practice (e.g., by looking again, more attentively, in better lighting, etc.). (p. 964)

While it is certainly true that some disagreements regarding the colors of things can be resolved, there are also a wide range of disputes which resist any easy resolution. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding "the dress" in 2015—a photograph of a dress which appeared to be very differently colored to different observers—which introduced huge numbers of people to the limitations of our capacity to adjudicate disputes about the colors of things.[17]

Our point is not that the outputs of the perceptual practice are systematically misleading. Rather, our point is that our perceptual practice—along with the individual perceptual systems it builds off of—delivers generally consistent outputs only within a range of situations to which it is evolutionarily adapted. In the case of colors, this involves, in particular: (i) a dominant light source that varies primarily along the spectrum of blue to yellow, with clear days casting objects in a bluer light and overcast days a more yellow one[18]; and (ii) a limited range of color-generating phenomena, namely those found in the natural world (which, for instance, includes strikingly little blue pigment). Once we exit these "normal" conditions, things start to get tricky.[19]

If the outputs of other evolved cognitive practices are constrained in terms of the consistency of the outputs they generate to a range of normal conditions, might not the same be true of the moral intuition practice? For instance, we plausibly evolved to think about moral responsibility in a world where our actions generally had direct, discernable, and generally immediate impacts on others. Nowadays, the morally salient aspects of many of the choices we face—whether to fly off for a holiday, whether to commute via car, public transit, or bike, or whether to eat animals—are highly indirect. One additional flight, car ride, or hamburger, is overwhelmingly unlikely to result in any change in how

---

[17] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress.

[18] See Broackes (2011, pp. 620-21) both for the relevant data and for a fascinating discussion of how this variance in the dominant hues of daylight might be responsible for our identification of blue and yellow as unique hues.

[19] A helpful example to illustrate this worry is midnight blue, which appears blue in daylight but black under most artificial lights. Put in more technical terms: midnight and navy blue are "metamers", or colors that appear identical in certain lights but not others. Similar effects can be generated with other colors. For a defense of the appeal to daylight to settle the colors of things, see Allen (2010). For criticism, see Michaelson & Cohen (2021).

things go in the world, and so overwhelmingly unlikely to prevent some person or animal from being harmed in the future. Faced with these sorts of issues, some people's intuitions seem to track the apparent platitude that moral responsibility requires causation; others' intuitions do not seem to be so guided.

Why does this matter for the prospects of social moral intuitionism? Well, even leaving aside the potential for evolutionary considerations to generate wholesale skeptical worries concerning the outputs of the moral intuition practice (cf. Street 2006, Plunkett 2020), if we are to take BCS' talk of moral intuitions being the outputs of an entrenched social practice seriously, then, if this practice is anything like the perceptual practice (as they allude to its being), we need to ask what the normal conditions are under which it can be expected to perform well. Since consistency is really the only criterion that BCS offer as a measure of the healthy function of the moral intuition practice, we can rephrase this as: we need to ask under what conditions the moral intuition practice generates generally consistent outputs. Even if it once did generate consistent outputs on a range of topics, we can see little reason to think that it does so any longer, at least with respect to a range of issues salient to our contemporary moral lives. In other words, even if BCS are right about everything else they claim—pace our various arguments above— we think there is reason to doubt that our moral intuition practice is functioning in its normal conditions any longer. If that's right, it doesn't necessarily invite wholesale skepticism about the outputs of this practice, but it does invite concerns about whether those outputs can be relied on to track the truth in our present moral circumstances.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have raised a number of challenges for BCS's new social version of moral intuitionism and for the prospects of social moral intuitionism more generally. In particular, we considered but ultimately rejected BCS's central claim that emphasizing the social dimension of our moral intuition practice can help establish the trustworthiness of our moral intuitions. We argued: (i) that it remains unclear what the epistemic significance of the social features of BCS's account is supposed to be; (ii) that the move of "going social" seems unmotivated, since it's not clear that the social versions of intuitionism perform better than other versions when it comes to some of the main challenges for moral intuitionism (e.g. the Truth-Connection Challenge); (iii) that contra BCS's suggestion there are good reasons to be doubtful that there actually exists anything

like a socially entrenched moral intuition practice (as opposed to moral practice or an intuition practice) in the first place; and (iv) that, even if their account were sufficient to explain how the practice serves to generate trustworthy outputs in the conditions to which it is adapted, there is reason to think that we are no longer living in such normal conditions.

Point (iv) is of interest independently of the prospects of social moral intuitionism. For it points to a broader genealogical lesson for normative theorizing: a great deal of our moral thinking, and the accompanying moral concepts, plausibly developed at a time in which the consequences of our actions were far more direct and immediate than they now are. This suggests that certain of our moral concepts—notably, concepts like RESPONSIBILITY, BLAMEWORTHINESS, and COMPLICITY—may well be ill-suited to thinking through some of the pressing moral problems we now face, like how we ought to live our lives in the face of impending catastrophic climate change. One reaction to this challenge would, of course, be to argue that it is ultimately misplaced, that our old moral concepts are indeed up to the task. Perhaps all that's required for the concept RESPONSIBILITY to apply is for an agent to stand as a partial cause of the relevant outcome, or perhaps the best understanding of our old concept RESPONSIBILITY will be revealed not to have required causation at all. Alternatively, we might do better to engage in an ameliorative project with respect to this concept, a project of engineering an improved concept RESPONSIBILITY, one better-suited to our present situation.[20]

While we ourselves are inclined towards this latter option, this isn't the place to press for going that route. Rather, the point we want to make here is just that we are hardly stuck with the moral concepts we have inherited. So regardless of whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about the existence of a mind-independent moral reality, one can ask: which concepts would serve to make our moral intuition practice, or perhaps our moral judgment practice more broadly, better—or better given our present circumstances? Despite the recent interest in conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics, these questions have not yet received the attention they deserve.[21]

---

[20] For related concerns the suitability of our moral concepts to our present moral situation, see Jamieson and DiPaolo (2016). For broader discussions of the propriety of revising our moral concepts, and the various epistemological and methodological issues this possibility raises for normative ethics, see Vargas (2013), Eklund (2017), and McPherson and Plunkett (2020, 2021).

[21] For helpful discussion and feedback, our thanks to Dustin Locke, Tristram McPherson, David Plunkett, and Indrek Reiland. This paper grew out of a discussion of BCS's article at an Uppsala reading group meeting. We thank all the other participants for an extremely rewarding discussion.

References

Allen, K. (2010). In defence of natural daylight. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, *91*, 1-18. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0114.2009.01355.x

Audi, R. (2004). *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Audi, R. (2008). Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *11(5)*, 475-492. doi: 10.1007/s10677-008-9123-9

Bengson, J., Cuneo, T. & Shafer-Landau, R. (2020). Trusting Moral Intuitions. *Noûs*, *54(4)*, 956-984. doi: 10.1111/nous.12291

BonJour, L. (1985). *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Broackes, J. (2011). Where Do the Unique Hues Come From? *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *2(4)*, 601-628. doi: 10.1007/s13164-011-0050-7

Cohen, J. (2009). *The Red and the Real*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chudnoff, E. (2020). *Forming Impressions: Expertise and Perception in Intuition*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Eklund, M. (2017). *Choosing Normative Concepts*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Faraci, D. (2015). A Hard Look at Moral Perception. *Philosophical Studies*, 172(8), 2055-2072. doi: 10.1007/s11098-014-0397-6

Huemer, M. (1997). Probability and Coherence Justification. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, *35(4)*, 463-472. doi: 10.1111/j.2041-6962.1997.tb00848.x

Huemer, M. (2005). *Ethical Intuitionism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jamieson, D. & Di Paola, M. (2016). Political Theory for the Anthropocene. In D. Held & P. Maffettone (Eds.), *Global Political Theory* (pp. 254-280). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gibbard, A. (1990). *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. New York: Clarendon Press.

Joyce, R. (2001). *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kalderon, M. (2007). Color pluralism. *Philosophical Review*, *116(4)*, 563-601. doi: 10.1215/00318108-2007-014

Lehrer, K. (1990). *Theory of Knowledge*. Oxon: Routledge.

Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books.

McPherson, T. & Plunkett, D. (2020). Conceptual Ethics and the Methodology of Normative inquiry. In A. Burgess & H. Cappelen & D. Plunkett (Eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (pp. 271-303). New York: Oxford University Press

McPherson, T. & Plunkett, D. (2021). Evaluation Turned on Itself: The Vindicatory Circularity Challenge to the Conceptual Ethics of Normativity. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Vol. 16* (pp. 207-232). New York: Oxford University Press.

Michaelson, E. & Cohen, J. (2020). Daylight savings: what an answer to the perceptual variation problem cannot be. *Philosophical Studies*, *178(3),* 833-843. doi: 10.1007/s11098-020-01460-9

Olsson, E. (2005). *Against Coherence: Truth, Probability, and Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reiland, I. (2021). On Experiencing Moral Properties. *Synthese, 198,* 315-325.

Setiya, K. (2012). *Knowing Right From Wrong*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Plunkett, D. (2020). Conceptual Truths, Evolution, and Reliability about Authoritative Normativity. *Jurisprudence, 11(2),* 169-212. doi: 10.1080/20403313.2020.1715104

Sayre-McCord, G. (1996). Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory. In W. Sinnott-Armstrong & M. Timmons (Eds.), *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology* (pp. 137-189). New York: Oxford University Press.

Street, S. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, *127(1),* 109-166. doi: 10.1007/s11098-005-1726-6

Thagard, P. (2000). *Coherence in Thought and Action*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Tersman, F. (2018). Recent work on reflective equilibrium and method in ethics. *Philosophy Compass*, *13(6),* 1-10. doi: 10.1111/phc3.12493

Vargas, M. (2013). *Building Better Things: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Väyrynen, P. (2018). Doubts About Moral Perception. In A. Bergqvist and R. Cowan (Eds.), *Evaluative Perception* (pp. 109-128). New York: Oxford University Press.