Justifying beliefs – challenging intuition
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Introduction.

It’s a relatively safe claim to say that all of us have intuitions about what the right or wrong action in a particular situation would be. When arguing about a moral dilemma we often try to convince our opponent that their belief in this particular matter is false by appealing to the opponent’s moral intuition. If we do this successfully our opponent will presumably abandon his original belief. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (hereinafter WSA) describes these intuitions as strong immediate beliefs regarding moral predicates, such as goodness, badness, rightness or wrongness etc. The beliefs are strong if the holder is confident in his believing in them, and immediate if the holder shapes that particular belief without inferring from other facts or beliefs that he might have (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). A classic example to show what our ethical intuitions are is the trolley case, in which a moral dilemma is presented and the reader is invited to choose between two outcomes, both of which are somewhat morally dubious. The option that the reader decides seems most permissible is presumably the result of that person’s ethical intuition – he believes that option would be the morally right thing to do.

A contemporary philosophical debate concerns exactly how much weight to give to our moral intuitions in sound justifications of moral theories or beliefs. One view, which we may call ethical intuitionism, claims that (at least) some intuitions in a moral context are justified in virtue of themselves, and do not have to be inferentially confirmed to be plausible. However, WSA argues against this view and claims that none of our moral intuitions is capable of delivering a justified belief produced in moral dilemmas without inference to other beliefs, or justification via confirmation, rendering ethical intuitionism false. His main thesis arrives at a sceptical position that implies that even if we did have correct intuitions regarding moral matters, we would still have to confirm them by inference in order to really be sure. If his claim is true, all of our intuitions that seek to find the morally right thing to do will have to be confirmed by other beliefs in order to justify the belief produced by the intuition (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). I think that this would change the way in which philosophical methodology is conducted in a profound way.
WSA presents a master argument based both on empirical psychological studies and philosophical argumentation. Russ Shafer-Landau and William Tolhurst (hereinafter Shafer-Landau and Tolhurst) oppose the argumentation of WSA and try to show that his conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises, and that the empirical studies (1) are not conducted in an environment in which sufficient and reliable data could be gathered, and (2) are not enough to support the conclusion that all of our intuitions are in need of justification via inference, only that some may be (Shafer-Landau, 2008, Tolhurst, 2008).

In this paper I will first analyse and outline some of the most critical arguments as presented by WSA in his paper Framing Moral Intuitions, then continue to do the same with Shafer-Landau and Tollhurst’s responses to this article, present some of my own critical remarks, and finally investigate whether WSA convincingly meets those responses or if ethical intuitionism survives the problem of justification by inference.

1. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong - Framing moral intuitions.

1.1 Inference as a method of justification.

When talking about moral intuition, you are basically talking about a way in which we form our moral beliefs. To validate intuition as a way of correctly producing a certain type of beliefs, we need to justify it somehow. A good analogy here would be to think of moral intuition in the same way as you would regarding colour vision; my ability to distinguish what colour a particular car has is dependent on the circumstances that surround me at that particular time. If its broad daylight and I am standing close to the car and have no perceptual diseases I can be sure that my belief about the colour of the car is justified, but in what way? There are at least two positions that have different answers here. The first one states that I am justified in believing that the car is, lets say, red only if I can infer this from other beliefs such as the fact that I am usually good at distinguishing colours, or that no one has ever corrected me when I express beliefs about the colour of cars. The justification lies in the inference from past experiences. An example here could be that a colour-blind person that has corrective surgery cannot be justified in saying that he believes his hospital bed
to be green, even if he is right about it, since he has no past experience to infer that belief from (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

The other position claims that you are justified in virtue of the direct experience provided by perceptual faculties such as your seeing, hearing and so on. Such experiences, under certain conditions, are in and of themselves justified. They are non-inferentially justified, and therefore foundational beliefs. In the example of the colour-blind person, he would be justified in believing that the hospital bed is green, even though he cannot make use of any linguistic classification when experiencing the particular colour green (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

WSA´s approach is to defend the position that a belief is justified when it is formed under reliable circumstances and when the belief is inferentially confirmed. Me believing that I am currently 26 years of age is justified since this belief is confirmed by inference to other beliefs such as the fact that my appearance is similar to others who claim they are my age, the details of my birth certificate, my parents telling me I am and so on. A belief is not justified when the holder of that belief thinks that it is enough evidence that things seem to be in a certain way. Again, if I seem to think that I am 26 years of age without confirming it from other beliefs it may very well be a true belief, but it’s not properly justified. In a similar manner the origin of my belief also has to be reliable. If I take a drug and then believe that my hallucinations are real, the origin of my belief is unjustified, referring to the unreliability of the circumstances (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

The same can be said about moral intuition; if it seems to me that a certain action in a moral dilemma is the right one, simply me intuiting that it is so is not enough to justify that belief, we need further confirmation to accurately determine justification. Moreover, if we frame these moral dilemmas so that the subjects generate different intuitions depending on in which terms, or context, the dilemma is presented, we can show that our intuitions regarding these matters are, in fact, not reliable (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

What kind of belief should you infer from then, in order to accurately determine whether the belief originated from intuition is justified or not? How much inferential data must be accessed before labelling a belief justified?
In reading WSA I gather that past experience and/or other peoples consistency in their beliefs (supposedly mutually cross referenced) is usually enough to inferentially confirm, thereby justifying, your beliefs.

WSA main point regarding the relation of inference is to show that we don’t believe other intuitions, or beliefs, to be true noninferentially and that there is no reason to suspect otherwise regarding our ethical intuitions. He arrives at a general principle for justification – if we ought to know that the process in which our intuitions are formed is unreliable in the circumstances, we are not justified to believe that these intuitions are correct without inferential confirmation (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). To conclude this chapter about inference, justification and reliability I will present what WSA calls his master argument based on the general principle:

“(1) If our moral intuitions are formed in circumstances where they are unreliable, and if we ought to know this, then our moral intuitions are not justified without inferential confirmation.

(2) If moral intuitions are subject to framing effects, then they are not reliable in those circumstances.

(3) Moral intuitions are subject to framing effects in many circumstances.

(4) We ought to know (3).

(5) Therefore, our moral intuitions in those circumstances are not justified without inferential confirmation.” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, p 52)

This argument suggests that the justification of moral intuitions is subject only to the relation of inference, and that if we ought to know that our intuitions sometimes flutter in their accuracy (due to framing effects in certain circumstances), they can’t be justified due to their unreliability. Already at this point I notice a problem. If you grant him the premise that intuitions suffer from unreliability, he still needs to show to which extent they are unreliable. There seems to be a kind of mathematical error in defining a class of something, in this case intuitions, as unreliable based on a few empirical snapshot-like studies. I will, as will Tolhurst and Shafer-Landau, revisit these remarks later in this paper.
I think that his general principle indeed shows that moral intuitions can be unreliable, but it may prove too much to say that all of them are. In the next section I will take a closer look at what could render unreliability in moral intuitions, and why, if at all, that means that all of our intuitions are untrustworthy. If empirical evidence indeed shows intuition to be unreliable, this will support the second premise of WSA’s master argument.

1.2 Empirical evidence and different types of framing effects.

Framing effects are the phenomenon of alteration in beliefs due to the way in which the believer is presented to whatever he shapes his belief about. If I say that my car goes from 0km/h to 100km/h in only 6 seconds you might believe that it’s a fast car. If I say that my car only does 0km/h to 100km/h in 6 seconds you might believe it’s a slow car. In both cases my car travels the same distance in the same period of time, but by using words like ‘only’ in different ways you can change the way in which the believer perceives the propositional content. The believer in this case has been subject to word framing effects, and since the car cannot be fast and slow at the same time, one of the held beliefs must be false (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

The other type of framing effect used by WSA in his paper is context based framing, or framing by ordering. This involves in which order the subject perceives different types of scenarios. If you in the first case see a man standing next to a large tree you will presumably believe this man to be short. If you in the following case see the man next to a small tree, you will still believe that the man is short, due to the initial belief. If we reverse the order in which you perceive the cases you will believe the man to be tall. If I want you to believe the one and not the other I can just arrange the order in which you perceive the different scenarios, since first impressions is the one that implements the stronger belief (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). If we introduce a person to three moral dilemmas (A, B, C) that are identical besides a slight alteration, and the intuition differs in the B-case depending on weather case A or C is presented first, the person is clearly subject to the framing effects of order. WSA gathers that these framing effects can be used to show that our moral intuitions are unreliable and thus giving empirical evidence to his attack on ethical intuitionism.
One of the studies WSA uses to support his claim is one by Petrinovich & O’Neill (1996), which uses the classical trolley case, but with variations in wording and order. I will presume that readers of this paper are familiar with the classical version of the trolley case, and for that reason not present the entire version here. In this study two classes of students were asked how much they agreed with the given choices in the different variations of the case. The ratings of each answer were positive +1 to +5 and negative -1 to -5. So if I strongly agree with a particular answer I would check the alternative marked +5. Half of the questions had alternatives that used negative wording such as “...throw the switch which will result in the death of the one innocent person on the side-track...” and “...do nothing which will result in the death of five innocent people...” (Petrinovich & O’Neill, 1996, p. 152). The other half of the questions used alternatives with positive wording where action (throwing the switch) led to saving the five and inaction (not throwing the switch) led to saving the one. The alternatives presented to the subjects did not change the outcome of the situation or in any other way alter the facts about the case. The results show that students tended to agree slightly with the action alternative that used the positive ‘save’ wording (0.65), and to disagree slightly with the same action alternative that used a negative ‘kill’ wording (-0.78) (Petrinovich & O’Neill, 1996, p. 152).

Since some of the subjects changed their mind about what is morally permissible, WSA concludes that their answers, or intuitions, cannot track the moral truth. This conclusion leans on the fact that it can’t be wording that decides what one morally ought to do - simply changing the words that describes the outcome cannot change what would be the morally right thing to do (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

Another study (Petrinovich & O´Neill, 1996) that tries to uncover the reliability of our intuitions uses ordering as the means to do so. In the experiment 60 students and three pairs of forms were used, each form containing three dilemmas, the first one containing: (1) side track trolley problem, (2) in order to save five persons you will have to scan the brain of a healthy person, effectively destroying that persons brain doing so, and (3), saving five by harvesting organs from one healthy person. So form 1 and form 1R
both contain three moral dilemmas, but are opposite in which order they are presented (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). Surprisingly there were no actual framing effects from order in the first form. Petrinovich and O’Neill speculate about why framing effects could not be detected, but neither them nor WSA gives, what I consider to be, a satisfying answer to how that could be. The only thing said is that just because there were not any framing effects detected, it does not follow that they were not there. It might seem as though WSA cherry picks here, in order to present a stronger case. I will discuss these matters further ahead.

The second form in the experiment posed three variations of the trolley problem; (1) pulling the switch, (2) pushing a button, causing a ramp to propel the train onto a set of tracks on a bridge, saving the five, and, (3) pushing a very large man in front of the train, causing it to stop. Form 2R presented these problems in reversed order. In this section of the experiment there were some framing effects by order – people tended to agree more strongly with action in the alternative that was presented first. When (1) was presented first students average agreement on action was 3.1 and when presented last only 1.0. The overall statistics in all three alternatives show that the alternative that is first presented is always more strongly agreed upon than the two following it (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). WSA concludes that these findings give even more evidence against the idea that our moral intuitions can track the truth.

In the next section of this paper I will present two answers to the master argument, first Russ Shafer-Landau’s article that suggests that if we can support the idea that some of our moral intuitions are true, then ethical intuitionism might still have the benefit of a doubt, followed by William Tolhurst’s claim that WSA fails to justify his conclusions. I will then proceed to discuss the empirical work and give some critical responses to the methodology and possible pitfalls that may have altered the results.

2.1 Sliding from some intuitions to all.
Shafer-Landau begins his critical analyse by denying that WSA has really done what he claims he has done. If the master argument, presented by WSA, is to
defeat ethical intuitionism it needs to be reformulated. Remember that the master argument concludes that moral believers are unjustified in believing their intuitions in many cases, but in order for the argument to really put the nail in the coffin it needs to state that moral believers are never justified in lack of inferential confirmation. So Shafer-Landau rewrites the master argument in a way that is suppose to do this, a version he calls “the amended argument”:

“(1) If a moral belief is subject to a framing effect, then that belief is justified only if the believer is able to confirm that there is no framing effect.
(2) All moral beliefs are subject to framing effects.
(3) Therefore, all moral beliefs are justified only if the believer is able to confirm that there is no framing effect.
(4) Such confirmation is a form of inferential justification.
(5) Therefore, all moral beliefs are justified, if they are, only inferentially.
(6) Therefore, ethical intuitionism is false.” (Shafer-Landau, 2008, p 84)

The revised version of WSA’s master argument clearly aims at defeating ethical intuitionism completely. If this line of premises holds water, we would have to abandon the position that moral intuitions can be noninferentially justified. However, this is the opposite of what Shafer-Landau wants, and he is quick to grant premise (1) and (4) as plausible, meaning that they are relatively harmless, claiming the second premise to be the deal breaker (Shafer-Landau, 2008). To understand what makes this premise problematic, we must investigate in what way a belief is subject to framing effects. If the truth-value of a person’s belief is intact, but the content of the belief is altered due to contextual or descriptive modes of presentation, the belief is subject to framing effects. If beliefs were subject to such alteration this would reveal a dispositional property in beliefs that is sensitive to alteration. Shafer-Landau presents two ways to interpret this susceptibility to alteration; (1) being subject to framing effects would mean that there is some possible metaphysical or logical situation in which our beliefs alter due to descriptive or contextual presentation, or (2) being subject to framing effects is to be understood probabilistically (Shafer-Landau, 2008).
The first interpretation would justify the second premise, but Shafer-Landau notes that a possible world argument of this sort has little or no meaning for what WSA sets out to do. Since (1) is knowledge of an a priori type, why bother with empirical data? WSA wants to say something of relevance to our world, regarding normativity, not a theoretical point about some distant mere possible world. It seems then that (2) is the most likely candidate to explain framing effects. A probabilistic interpretation says that the content of moral beliefs, subject to framing effects, are likely to change if produced under different contexts that one is likely to be confronted with in the actual world. Under this pretext the second premise in the amended argument is false. There are at least a few moral beliefs that would not alter due to context or wording; consider “the deliberate humiliation, rape and torture of a child, for no purpose other than securing the rapist pleasure is immoral” (Shafer-Landau, 2008).

This moral belief would be intact no matter what context or wording used to provoke otherwise, thus proving that the second premise is false. Shafer-Landau gathers that if there are other moral beliefs that could be equally immune to framing effects, and that WSA must realize this, why stress that ethical intuitionism is false? Why could there not be a certain class of intuitions that are noninferentially justified? In the next section I will continue to outline Shafer-Landau’s criticism and attempts to defend ethical intuitionism.

2.2 The real argument.

Shafer-Landau constructs what he calls “the real argument” which will act as a boiled down version of the master argument and the amended argument:

“(1) If moral beliefs are subject to framing effects in many circumstances, then, for any one of my moral beliefs, it is justified only if I am able to inferentially confirm it.

(2) Moral beliefs are subject to framing effects in many circumstances.

(3) Therefore, for any one of my moral beliefs, it is justified only if I am able to inferentially confirm it.” (Shafer-Landau, 2008, p 86)
The second premise requires a baseline understanding of how “many” is to be understood, an issue that will be discussed later when reviewing Tolhurst’s paper. For now, the interpretation that moral beliefs subject to framing effects are somewhat high seems reasonably plausible, considering the few empirical studies conducted. It can be useful to note that there is a position that suggests that even though moral beliefs may come in thousands, there might only be a few general moral beliefs on which all the others rely. This kind of reliance means that particular moral beliefs are implied from the more general ones. The general belief that it is wrong to kill implies that it is wrong to kill a particularly gruesome murderer. So, if we discover that one of these more general moral beliefs are subject to framing effects then presumably all subclasses to that one would suffer as well. This position would strengthen the second premise in the real argument (Shafer-Landau, 2008). However, Shafer-Landau says that the proposition of such a coherent and well-developed moral system would be an idealization of reality, not actually reflecting how we go about shaping our particular moral beliefs. It is hard to see that moral agents form their particular moral beliefs because they see that it is implied by one of the general ones. So, even if the empirical research is vindicated there is a problem in determining that moral beliefs come in general and particular classes, the former implying the latter.

The first premise of the real argument is about the justification of moral beliefs. Only if I am able to make an inferential confirmation I am justified in believing. Shafer-Landau is not satisfied with the suggestion that me being able to inferentially confirm such and such to be justified is the same as the idea that I am required to inferentially confirm such and such to be justified. The ability to infer, Shafer-Landau says, is sufficient but not necessary for moral beliefs to be justified. There might be moral beliefs that are noninferentially and inferentially justified. Some beliefs, Shafer-Landau says, is justified due to the agents careful non-inferential reflection. There is no compelling argument that shows non-inferential justification to be impossible, only that in some groups, some people show tendencies to lack the ability for non-inferential deliberative reasoning (Shafer-Landau, 2008).
WSA’s strongest argument, as the conditional for inferential justification, is that even if we hold moral beliefs impervious to framing effects or other fallacious tendencies, others might not. Because others might not be so coherent, we must confirm that we are. Thus making even the epistemic fortunate subject to inferential confirmation. This, however, might not be entirely true. Shafer-Landau refutes this argument in a similar manner as the other by claiming that my ability to inferentially confirm that I am justified does not mean that the justification is dependent on that ability. The force of WSA’s argument is about the ones that do not know in which group they belong, thus making their intuitions unreliable. WSA’s point is illuminated with an analogy about thermometers. If we have a group of these instruments, and suspect that some of them might be unreliable we cannot be justified in believing any one of them to be accurate until we can confirm in which group they belong. Only then do we know which thermometers are in the reliable group and which are not. So the analogy makes is clear that we cannot rely on our intuitions until we can confirm that they are free from framing effects or any other doxastic pitfalls (Sinnott-Armstrong, Shafer-Landau, 2008).

To answer this puzzling dilemma Shafer-Landau begins with prima facie duties, as stipulated by Sir David Ross, that are held as true genuine moral beliefs by almost everyone. So, if there is a class of moral beliefs that are unanimously held, why would these be justified only inferentially? In my reading of Shafer-Landau I suspect that just because these prima facie duties are unanimously held does not mean that they are collectively deliberative duties, rather that each and every one would agree after careful non-inferential reasoning.

The thermometer analogy that questions our epistemic status as agents is not adequate enough to refute the idea of non-inferential justification. Remember that even if we have access to inferential confirmation, it does not follow that inferential confirmation is required for justification. The point is that just because other moral beliefs might be vulnerable to framing effects, thus requiring inferential confirmation does not mean that moral beliefs that are unanimously held are subject to the same scepticism of credibility (Shafer-Landau, 2008). So, it seems that we in fact can be non-inferentially justified at least in some cases.
Shafer-Landau means that the argument of WSA relies to heavily on the second-order belief, the belief that some of our intuitions may be wrong. This belief is supposed to act as an epistemic underminer to our initial intuitive belief, but it is not entirely clear that it does the job since we might not all have these second order beliefs in all cases considered (Shafer-Landau, 2008).

In the next section of this paper I will outline other sceptical issues against WSA’s attack on ethical intuitionism, put forward by William Tolhurst.

3.1 Epistemic grounds for beliefs.
In his analysis of WSA’s article, Tolhurst finds a number of unsatisfying conclusions and assumptions that he claims must be attended to in order for the master argument to properly defeat ethical intuitionism. His initial remark, and one that sparks the other, regards WSA’s definition of justified belief:

“To call a belief “justified” is to say that the believer ought to hold that belief as opposed to suspending belief, because the believer has adequate epistemic grounds for believing that this is true (at least in some minimal sense).” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, p 48)

It is from this definition that Tolhurst claims that WSA’s conclusion in fact does not follow the premises. The epistemic grounds that forms the belief that ethical intuitionism is false is too weak (not adequate enough) to be justified. Epistemic humility makes us hold the belief as opposed to suspending it (Tolhurst, 2008). This does not mean that the master argument by WSA is wrong or fallacious, only that it needs to have more epistemic meat on the justification bone.

Tolhurst continues by questioning WSA’s third premise, which states that moral intuitions are subject to framing effects in many circumstances, by contextualizing the meaning of the word ‘many’. Say that there are some defects on a hundred cars of a particular sort. If owning 10 cars is considered owning a lot (which seems uncontroversial), then surely owning a hundred cars ought to be considered owning many cars. It follows then that if a hundred cars is many
cars, then many cars are defective. If many cars of a particular kind are defective, it follows that the particular car at hand, is unreliable (Tolhurst, 2008).

According to Tolhurst, this kind of reasoning is flawed, since what counts as many is contextually bound. As owning cars go, a hundred is a lot, but considering the amount of cars of this particular sort produced, a hundred is not considered many. It seems reasonable then, to ask for proof that intuitions as a class is subject to framing effects in a sufficient amount of circumstances in order for it to be considered as many. If these demands can be met, it would make the epistemic grounds for believing that they are unreliable more stable.

Furthermore, Tolhurst means that context plays another role in determining whether something can be considered reliable or not in analysing WSA’s analogy with the car that only starts half of the time, thus being unreliable. If we put this seemingly unreliable car in a different context, say in the early stage of automobile industry, a car that starts half of the time could very well be considered as reliable (Tolhurst, 2008). It seems to me then, that context plays a part; not only as a support to WSA’s argumentation about reliability, but that it also undermines it. As WSA concludes that what one ought to do cannot be dependent on context, thus rendering intuitions unreliable, Tolhurst in turn concludes that what is in fact reliable, can be dependent on context, thus weakening WSA’s master argument.

3.2 From narrative to general circumstances.

Tolhurst continues his essay by questioning the empirical work mentioned in WSA’s article. How can it be that narrative description stimulates a genuine intuitive response in test subjects? Generally our intuitions are formed in perceptual circumstances, and not in thought experiments of a verbal sort. So Tolhurst’s concern is whether the intuitions produced in an environment that does not only provoke framing effects, but that also uses different data input, really are comparable to the ones we have outside of the psychology lab. The ways in which we usually form our intuitions are nonverbal, so it might be that intuitions react differently to verbal input than perceptual. So the data gathered from the psychological research presented to strengthen WSA’s master argument might not be accurate enough to bear the premises to the conclusion.
Again, Tolhurst remarks that intuitions in fact might function in a similar manner when dealing with verbal input, but that this issue remains unsolved and that this is another flaw that makes our epistemic humility choose to not suspend our belief as produced by intuition (Tolhurst, 2008).

So according to Tolhurst, what we really need to determine if our moral intuitions are reliable or not, thus needing or not needing inferential confirmation, is to find out what the baseline reliability of our intuitions are and the frequency of framing effects in an environment that better resembles how we usually form our moral intuitions. The conclusion Tolhurst is aiming at here is one about sufficient data. It seems that the research made has raised a point in doubting the epistemic qualities in some moral intuitions, but that we need to know if the results really are representative of moral intuitions as a class. As of now, all we can say is that the percentage of unreliable moral intuitions are above 0 but below 100 (Tolhurst, 2008).

I generally agree with Tolhurst’s criticism as presented above. However, it may be noted that they are mainly of a negative kind; the main point of argument is that WSA has not to a sufficient degree shown that intuitions are unreliable. But I think that a stronger case can also be made. At least my arguments in the next section shows that there are positive grounds for thinking that the empirical experiments involved are unreliable.

4. Using a reliable process to determine reliable functions.

I have a couple of critical remarks about the empirical data, three of which I will type out here. First of all I think it is important to note that in the second study presented, no student changed his or her mind about what action is permissible, only to what degree it is. If students go from strongly agreeing to simply agreeing, I am not sure that there are any relevant framing effects in those cases. WSA presents an analogy that says that a car could not be considered to be reliable if it only starts half of the time, referring to the fact that moral intuitions change in accordance to framing effects (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). It seems to me that the analogy should be that the car actually starts every time, but that it sometimes starts right away and sometimes after a good 10-20 seconds.
I also note that if the strongest level of agreement is made in the first presented case, whatever the case may be, that could be due to intuitions stronger qualia, deteriorating as the subject second guess him or herself, or tries to rationalize his or her intuition. Intuition then, could act as a strong immediate belief mechanism, a kind of epistemic highway if you will, with an emotional quality that is in fact reliable. The unreliability could be due to the idea that people can question it introspectively, causing the qualia to fade out, which in turn causes the subject to doubt the original belief. However, if this is true, I still have to provide a satisfying answer to why different subjects have different first hand beliefs in some cases. It would possibly be too much to say, I think, that people do not really disagree about what the right action would be in a moral dilemma, if we trust the notion that the same intuition mechanism is used in the same way in the same case, generating different outcomes.

My third remark regarding these studies concerns the reliability of the subjects. If I, as a first year student, were given the task of giving my intuitive beliefs about which actions that are permissible in certain cases, I would probably answer in accordance to what I believed was common, rather then right. That is to say, I would give answers in a test-like fashion, thinking there would actually be a correct answer in an answer sheet somewhere. My point here is that researchers may analyse the results assuming that the answers really are derived from intuition, but it seems clear that this could be otherwise. If answers were in fact derived from different origins, that fact would render the studies unreliable, something that surely weakens the third and fourth premise in WSA master argument. In conclusion it seems that WSA has, in his search for epistemic reliabilism, resorted to an unreliable process.

If, however, we would grant the possibility that all these remarks are unjust, and could easily be refuted, the empirical data seems to back up WSA´s master argument, challenging ethical intuition to render a plausible answer to his inquiry. In the last section of this paper I will present WSA´s reply to the issues raised by his critics.
5. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong – How to apply generalities: Reply to Tolhurst and Shafer-Landau.

5.1 Reliability in general, inference in particular.
WSA starts his reply by granting that Tolhurst and Shafer-Landau has many crucial points, but says that they are built from mistakes that he made in his former paper. He claims that his main focus with the paper was to present a way in which generality is supposed to work when determining the reliability of a certain class i.e. moral intuitions. WSA gathers that framing effects give some non-negligible reason for believing that moral intuitions as a class are unreliable, not that particular moral beliefs are. So the moral belief that it is immoral to torture and murder a child for one’s own pleasure falls in to the class of moral intuitions, but also in the smaller class of intuitions that nearly everyone agrees with. So, WSA concludes, the number of true beliefs in the latter class might be high, in other words generally reliable, even if the number of true beliefs in the former class might be low. So even if there are some moral beliefs that are reliable, they still fall under the class of moral intuitions, a class that WSA suggests is unreliable due to the empirical studies presented in his first paper. So despite the narrower class of intuitions that can withstand any attempts to be framed, all other intuitions, in virtue of also being intuitions of a moral kind, will lower the reliability baseline for the entire class. In analogy WSA puts forth a voting example; if 70% of the inhabitants in Texas voted for Bush in 2004, and all that we know is that Pat voted in Texas in 2004, we could reasonably assign a .7 probability that Pat voted for Bush. But if we were to find out that fewer than 50% of the women in Texas did not vote for Bush and we also know that Pat is a woman our estimate would no longer be just. However, if we did not know the percentage of woman that voted for Bush our .7 probability claim would still be plausible. The point is that our assigned probability claims for the larger class of voters in Texas in 2004 will remain until such point when we gather additional information that we believe is a valid reason to change that probability claim (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

However, there is a difference in reasonable probability assignments and justified beliefs. WSA presents a principle that he admits is a tad weak: “if it is
reasonable for a person to assign a large probability that a certain belief is false, then that person is not epistemically justified in holding that belief” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). This standard will, according to WSA, also apply to immediate beliefs, which would strengthen the claim that all intuitions are justified only inferentially, since they belong to the same class. So the empirical evidence, as WSA wants us to understand it, is just to show us that we ought to assign a large enough probability that our intuitions are generally unreliable, making it necessary for us to justify all of our moral intuitions inferentially. Our probability assignment for the larger class of intuitions will have to be used to evaluate particular moral intuitions until we have some special reason to believe that this particular belief falls into a narrower class of intuitions that have a smaller chance of being false. But special reasons, naturally, enables us to inferentially confirm these particular moral beliefs and thus making all moral intuitions justified only when inferentially confirmed (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

In response to the criticisms of Shafer-Landau and Tolhurst WSA reformulates his initial master argument, aiming to formalize his reply and thus defeating ethical intuition:

“1) For any subject S, particular belief B, and class of beliefs C, if S is justified in believing that B is in C and is also justified in believing that a large percentage of beliefs in C are false, but S is not justified in believing that B falls into any class of Beliefs C* of which a smaller percentage is false, then S is justified in believing that B has a large probability of being false. (generalized from cases like Pat’s vote)

2) Informed adults are justified in believing that their own moral intuitions are in the class of moral intuitions.

3) Informed adults are justified in believing that a large percentage of moral intuitions are false. (from studies of framing effects)

4) Therefore, if an informed adult is not justified in believing that a certain moral intuition falls into any class of beliefs of which a smaller percentage is false, then the adult is justified in believing that this particular moral intuition has a large probability of being false. (from 1-3)
A moral believer cannot be epistemically justified in holding a particular moral belief when that believer is justified in believing that the moral belief has a large probability of being false. (from the standard above)

Therefore, if an informed adult is not justified in believing that a certain moral intuition falls into any class of beliefs of which a smaller percentage is false, then the adult is not epistemically justified in holding that moral intuition. (from 4-5)

If someone is justified in believing that a belief falls into a class of beliefs of which a smaller percentage is false, then that person is able to infer that belief from the premise that it falls into such a class. (by definition of “able to infer”)

Therefore, an informed adult is not epistemically justified in holding a moral intuition unless that adult is able to infer that belief from some premises. (from 6-7)

If a believer is not epistemically justified in holding a belief unless the believer is able to infer it from some premises, then the believer is not justified noninferentially in holding the belief. (by definition of “noninferentially”)

Therefore, no informed adult is noninferentially justified in holding any moral intuition. (from 8-9)

Moral intuitionism claims that some informed adults are noninferentially justified in holding some moral intuitions. (by definition)

Therefore, moral intuitionism is false. (from 10-11)” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, p 99-100)

What WSA has done here is nothing less than a rabbit in a hat trick. He manages to pull out the need for inferential confirmation by using unreliability in class determinations, drawing with him even the most self-evident prima facie duties. However beautifully WSA puts his argument together at this point, I still wonder if the third premise really stands its ground. What could count as ‘many’ or ‘large’ in this context is still a vital part of understanding the argument correctly. In reading WSA it seems like there is still a lot of work to be done in this area, although he is keen to point out that it is standard for scientists to use a .95
probability assignment to substantiate belief. If this type of standard were to be used on moral beliefs many and large may not necessarily have to be neither many nor large to support the third premise. That is to say, it would be enough for a quite small percentage of framing effects to fully support the third premise, rendering ethical intuition deeply wounded. However, one could disagree about using the scientific model for justifying belief and claim that such a high baseline for justification is too much for moral beliefs. This would weaken the third premise but also weaken the status of moral beliefs in general, which, in my view, is a much to high price to pay for ethical intuition.

5.2 Circumstantial evidence.

That said, I don’t think WSA has managed to meet the criticism I raised earlier in the paper (section 4). My arguments raise a serious challenge to premise 3 regarding whether the results from the cited empirical work really are procedurally inadequate or not. My previous argument stated that there could be a number of reasons to why test subjects answered in the fashion they did, and there is still no valid reason, or special circumstance, that would point to us thinking that it in fact was intuition that was active. It seems odd enough that such a small amount of empirical work can validate the third premise, but the fallacious tendencies really tips the table to the advantage of ethical intuitionism. To recap and outline some of the criticisms I raised earlier, lets look at the analogy of colour-vision. If intuition is supposed to work analogous to the perceptual sense vision, it seems obvious that there are clear-cut cases where the nature of circumstances is dependent on additional facts in order to be justified. This position can be held both by believers in ethical intuitionism and their opponents. The dispute concerns whether informed adults ought to believe that the nature of the circumstances is in need of additional fact so frequently that they loose trust in their original belief.

In cases where there are no apparent changes regarding the normal input/output in your mental states, you are well justified to believe that the car in front of you, in the middle of the day is, in fact, green. It is justified perceptually, in and of itself. We might not be able to conceptually determining the linguistically correct word that goes with our perceptual experience, but that
is not what the issue concerns. The same concept applies to intuition. Under the same premises as the previous example, we can be sure that our intuition gives us correct answers in similar contexts. Let's bring the trolley case back up on the table. What if there were a million people on the main track, and a pig on the side-track? This appears to be almost a rhetorical question and I am pretty confident that potential framing effects, if any, would be very scarce. So the conclusion that the evidence of framing effects reveals a disposition of susceptibility in intuitions as a class is falsely based on cases where the nature of circumstances are particularly difficult. In the perceptual vision analogy this would be like concluding that you need glasses (and that all visual experiences are unreliable) if you can't determine whether there is an H or an A posted on a crummy cardboard box 100 meters away while drunk.

The other argument, that seems to intertwine with the previous one, is that moral agents might have access to moral truths via intuitional faculties. Recall the case of the colour blind gentleman that had corrective eye surgery. When he wakes up and experiences the colour green for the first time in his life, WSA insists that he cannot be justified in believing that the object actually is green, due to his lack of experience to draw inference from. According to WSA he has to validate his belief by asking the doctor. My version of the story is mentioned in the previous part of this section and states that his perceptual experience of the colour justifies his belief that it is in fact the colour green he is seeing, but that he might have to ask the doctor what linguistically correct term he must apply to this colour, in order for proper communication to function. Intuition then, can be seen much in the same way. We might have an immediate epistemic sensation telling us that X rather than Y is correct. The next thing we do is to figure out how to justify this emotional response to others. We might be unfamiliar with moral language, or just experience the situation ambiguous, thus repressing the level of commitment to the initial belief.


In this paper I have outlined and analysed the arguments of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Russ Shafer-Landau and William Tolhurst, the two latter defending ethical intuitionism from the argument of unreliability in the class of moral
intuitions as put forward by the former. First, WSA presents his definition of moral intuitions, explaining the relevance of inference and presenting various ways in which our moral intuitions can be manipulated and framed, thus forcing us to justify our intuitions by inference to other beliefs. Shafer-Landau suggests that there are several prima facie like moral beliefs that are impervious to any framing effects which would enable them to be justified noninferentially, which in turn would make ethical intuition alive and kicking once again. Tolhurst makes no serious damage to WSA’s general idea, instead he focuses on the notion that more empirical facts need to be gathered before drawing the conclusion that moral intuitions suffer from unreliability in general. My own critique against the attack on ethical intuitionism comes from the empirical studies in context based framing effects. I suggested that intuitions might be the product of a kind of epistemic super faculty, accessing moral truths instantly, but that other faculties that deal with truth-value and reflection might cloud the original belief, causing us to change our minds. This idea would explain the phenomenon that researchers refer to as framing effects. In the last chapter WSA defends his original thesis, constructing a massive formal argument that incorporates probability, generality and class determination, effectively answering refuting both Shafer-Landau and Tolhurst’s remarks. In conclusion I believe that a lot of interesting research can be made in this field, and that a lot of stones have to be turned in order for any of the competing views to come out victorious, although my allegiance lies with ethical intuition. Our moral intuitions are simply too effective and functional as a tool to be discarded in philosophical methodology.
7. List of literature.


