The Secret Emptiness of Greene’s Argument

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The key point of contact between moral philosophy and scientific moral psychology is moral intuition.\(^2\)

In his forthcoming article and book chapter ‘The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul,’ Joshua Greene argues against normative deontology on two fronts, one empirical and one philosophical. On the empirical front, Greene argues that the psychological processes that underly our deontological moral judgments are different in kind from the processes that underly our consequentialist moral judgments. In particular, Greene hypothesizes that deontological moral theory flows from a pattern of intuitive emotional responses to harm. Although the empirical claim is extremely interesting and worthy of consideration in its own right, my primary aim in this paper is to evaluate Greene’s philosophical claim that “our understanding of moral psychology... casts doubt on deontology as a school of normative moral thought.”\(^3\) In other words, if the empirical view is true, then we should abandon deontology qua normative moral theory (and adopt consequentialism).

I hope to show that Greene’s alleged debunking of normative deontology leaves much to be desired, and that his empirical work, while groundbreaking, offers little in the way of ammunition to use against deontology. I do not intend to defend a deontological theory of normative ethics. Rather, I hope to show only that Greene’s arguments are not sufficient to eliminate deontology from the list of live options. I’ll begin by introducing some background material from moral psychology, and go on to explicate Greene’s empirical claim. In section two I’ll consider a pair of evolutionary arguments for Greene’s philosophical claim, rejecting each in turn. In the final section I will consider and reject a third evolutionary argument, and ultimately charge Greene with begging the

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\(^1\)This paper is a work in progress, drafted in November 2006.  
\(^2\)Greene (Forthcoming C: 41)  
\(^3\)Greene (Forthcoming C: 41)
question against deontology. I realize that this charge sounds rather lame and uncharitable, but I have a bit to say about how the circularity arises that I hope will shed some light on the debate.

1 The Cognitive Profile of Moral Judgments

Broadly speaking, a cognitive process is a psychological mechanism that takes some information as input, manipulates that information in some way, and outputs either some information or some behavior. We can think of a cognitive process as a kind of computation. Each moral judgments is caused by some cognitive process or other. What are the important features of the cognitive processes that cause moral judgments?

1.1 Three Ways of Distinguishing Cognitive Processes

Conscious versus Unconscious Processes

One way we might divide up cognitive processes is to distinguish between conscious and unconscious processes. Roughly, a cognitive process is conscious when the cognizer is aware of that process. “To say that [for e.g.] moral reasoning is a conscious process means that... the reasoner is aware that it is going on.”

Perhaps the requirement that one must actually be aware of the process is too strong; it may enough that the process is available for awareness, if one pays attention. In any case, some sort of awareness or potential for awareness is a characteristic feature of conscious cognitive processes. A process is unconscious if it is not available for awareness or attention (appropriately enough). Even an unconscious cognitive process can produce mental a content of which we are aware. If the content-producing process is unconscious, however, we are blind to the mechanisms by which the content is produced. Such contents seems to appear in consciousness ex nihilo, as if by magic. For example, creative insight is often marked by the sudden appearance in consciousness of an idea, with no awareness of the idea’s origin. Sometimes moral judgments

\[4\text{Haidt (2001: 818)}\]
are produced in an unconscious fashion: “moral intuition can be defined as the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment... without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion.”

When a moral judgment is produced in this fashion, it is presented in consciousness as a sudden gut-reaction feeling, and the mechanisms that produced the judgment are invisible to consciousness.

**Deliberate versus Automatic Processes**

“The popular meaning of ‘automatic’ is something that happens, no matter what, as long as certain conditions are met. An automatic answering machine clicks into operation after a specified number of phone rings and then records whatever the caller wants to say. No one has to be at home to turn it on to record whenever the phone happens to ring.” In other words, a process is automatic if one lacks a certain kind of control over the process. Automatic cognitive processes function like answering machines, and “click into operation” whether the cognizer wants it or not. A cognitive process is deliberate, on the other hand, if one has a certain kind of control over the process: one must be able to initiate the process by an act of will (or an intention). Perhaps an example is in order. When your doctor hits you on the knee with a little hammer and your leg reflexively kicks into the air, the kicking is caused by an unconscious cognitive process: you need not think about the mechanics of moving your leg, and your leg moves regardless of whether you intend to move it. When a football player kicks a field goal, on the other hand, this is a deliberate process. Even though the kicker may have practiced kicking field goals for many years, such that he need not think about the specific mechanics of moving his leg, the kicker nonetheless has some say in initiating the kicking movement. Relatedly, the kicker has the power to veto the kick; he can abort the kick at will, and so the kick is deliberate. When the doctor taps your leg, by contrast, you are unable to veto the automatic kicking motion that ensues.

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5 Haidt (2001: 818)  
6 Bargh & Chartrand (1999: 464)
Unvalenced versus Valenced Processes

A cognitive process is behaviorally valenced if it biases the cognizer toward a particular path of action. For example, it’s plausible to think that the olfactory representation of rotten eggs is behaviorally valenced, insofar as it biases the cognizer to avoid eating the rotten eggs. The rancid smell of rotten eggs triggers averse behavior in way that a more linguistic thought about rotten eggs does not. Valenced cognitive processes come in handy in situations where a certain behavioral response will almost always be appropriate, or in situations where a quick behavioral response is crucial. Valenced processes that are also unconscious can help in taking some of the cognitive load off of conscious processes: valenced processes may “predispose the individual’s behavior toward positive objects and away from negative ones when the conscious mind is elsewhere, thinking about tonight’s dinner perhaps or worrying about tomorrow’s job interview.”\(^7\) Unvalenced cognitive processes, on the other hand, are behaviorally neutral, in that they do not bias the cognizer toward a particular path of action. For example, the thought that “those eggs are rotten” does not bias the cognizer toward any particular plan of action. The cognizer might decide to approach the rotten eggs (perhaps in order to throw them out), or to avoid the eggs (perhaps to avoid eating them). “Highly flexible behavior requires [unvalenced] representations that can be easily mixed around and recombined as situational demands vary, and without pulling the agent in sixteen different behavioral directions at once.”\(^8\) Emotionally charged cognitive processes are plausibly valenced. For example, feelings of shame, embarrassment, and fear bias the cognizer toward retreat behavior, feelings of anger bias the cognizer toward aggressive behavior, and so forth. By contrast, prototypically rational cognitive process (e.g. reasoning about propositional logic) are plausibly unvalenced. For example, grasping an instance of modus ponens does not bias the cognizer toward

\(^7\) Bargh & Chartrand (1999: 475)
\(^8\) Greene (Forthcoming C: 7)
any particular action.

**Intuitive versus “Cognitive” Processes**

In light of the above distinctions, I’d like to introduce a few terms of art for use throughout the rest of the paper. The purpose of introducing these terms is to group together unconscious, automatic, behaviorally valenced processes into a single category (and similarly for processes that are conscious, deliberate, and unvalenced). It will also be helpful to introduce a term to refer to cognitive processes that play a key role with respect to morality. In particular, we will be interested in the cognitive processes that play a role in causing moral judgments or moral actions:

- **intuitive cognitive process:** a cognitive process that is unconscious, automatic, and behaviorally valenced
- **“cognitive” cognitive process:** a cognitive process that is conscious, deliberate, and behaviorally unvalenced
- **moral cognitive process:** any cognitive process that plays a central role (or tends to play a central role) in the causation of a moral judgment or a moral action

### 1.2 Moral Cognition is Unconscious, Automatic and Valenced (Haidt)

On Jonathan Haidt’s view, the lion’s share of our moral judgments and behaviors are caused by intuitive, emotional cognitive processes. “[W]e see an action or hear a story and we have an instant feeling of approval or disapproval. These feelings are best thought of as affect-laden intuitions, as they appear suddenly and effortlessly in consciousness, with an affective valence (good or bad), but without any feeling of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion.”

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theory of moral cognition. “Cognitive” cognitive processes happen only after the fact: “Moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning.”10 Because “cognitive” cognitive processes do not typically play a role in the causation of moral judgments, on Haidt’s view, he sometimes refers to moral reason as the “rational tail” that wags behind the “emotional dog” (I take it that moral emotion is a dog because it has normative bite).

One conspicuous result of Haidt’s social intuitionism is that it seems to leave no room for moral reasoning to enter into the causal picture. “Moral intuition is a kind of cognition, but it is not a kind of reasoning.”11 This is a surprising (even shocking) result. It is natural to think that moral reasoning plays some causal role, at least some of the time (and perhaps much of the time). Views of moral cognition that emphasize the role of unconscious, automatic processing threaten our commonsense picture of moral reasoning. For if moral reasoning plays no causal role in generating moral judgments, then it looks like moral reasoning is an epiphenomenon. Haidt doesn’t exactly embrace epiphenomenalism about moral reasoning, but he certainly flirts with the idea. I won’t discuss Haidt’s social intuitionist view any further here, but it serves as a nice stepping stone to Greene’s empirical view, which can be seen as an extension or refinement of Haidt’s view.

1.3 A “Dual Process” Model of Moral Cognition (Greene)

On Greene’s view, it is not the case that all moral cognitive processes operate unconsciously and automatically. Greene also allows that “cognitive” cognitive processes are capable of causing moral judgments, and he is not tempted by global epiphenomenalism about moral reasoning. In this regard, Greene’s view is more moderate than Haidt’s. Still, Greene maintains that there is a certain subclass of moral judgments that are caused by unconscious, automatic, behaviorally valenced cognitive processes. Let a characteristically deontological moral judgment be a moral judgment

10 Haidt (2001: 817)
11 Haidt (2001: 814)
that rules in favor of a characteristically deontological conclusion (e.g. “Keep your hands to yourself on the footbridge”), and let a characteristically consequentialist moral judgment be a moral judgment that rules in favor of a characteristically consequentialist conclusion (e.g. “Pull the lever to save more lives”). Greene holds that our characteristically deontological moral judgments are normally caused by intuitive cognitive processes, while characteristically consequentialist judgments are normally caused by more “cognitive” cognitive processes.

Why does Greene hold this view? One locus of support is a body of neuroimaging data collected from subjects who consider trolley dilemmas while they sit in an fMRI machine. The subjects were given one of the following sorts of trolley dilemma:

**Switch Case:** A trolley is speeding down the track toward five people who will be killed by the trolley if you do nothing. The only way to save the five is to hit the switch, transferring the trolley to an alternate track where it will kill only one person instead of five.

**Footbridge Case:** As in the switch case, a trolley threatens the lives of five people. You are standing on a footbridge next to a (very) large person, directly above the track. This time the only way you can save the five is to push the large person off the footbridge and onto the track, where he will be killed by the trolley.

After being presented with a dilemma, subjects were asked whether it is morally appropriate to pull the switch (or to push the large man off the footbridge). The majority of subjects who were given the switch case said that it is indeed appropriate to pull the switch, but the majority of subjects given the footbridge case said that it is not appropriate to push the man off the footbridge. This much is interesting, but the really interesting result is the fMRI data. When subjects were thinking about a switch case, the prototypically “rational” (or “cognitive”) centers of their brain tended to “light up.” When subjects were thinking about a footbridge case, the prototypically “emotional” centers of their brain tended to light up. More generally, situations embodying an “up

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12 Greene (Forthcoming C: 5-6)
13 Greene (Forthcoming C: 31)
14 Greene et al. (2001)
close and personal,” “ME-HURT-YOU” structure tended to elicit intuitive, emotional processing, and impersonal situations tended to elicit “cognitive” processing.\textsuperscript{15}

Greene has a wealth of empirical data up his sleeve, most of which I won’t attempt to touch on here. The important point to take away is that Greene discovered two significant correlations: one between characteristically consequentialist judgments (such as the typical response to the switch case) and “cognitive” processing, and another between characteristically deontological judgments (such as the typical response to the footbridge case) and intuitive emotional processing. This discovery lead Greene to hypothesize a kind of “dual process” model of moral cognition. Some moral situations are processed intuitively, and some are processed “cognitively”. Running with the dual process model, Greene et al. hypothesize that “the controversy surrounding utilitarian moral philosophy reflects an underlying tension between competing subsystems in the brain.”\textsuperscript{16} The “competition hypothesis” nicely captures the spirit of Greene’s empirical claim.

2 Greene’s Philosophical Claim: Deontology is Dubious

In what follows I will assume the truth of Greene’s empirical claim, and focus on the reasoning that connects it to the philosophical claim. Whereas the empirical claim was intended to be merely descriptive, Greene intends for his philosophical claim to carry some normative force. He argues that the evidence from empirical psychology “casts doubt” upon deontology as a normative theory, and that the evidence does not tell against consequentialism as a normative theory (and perhaps even counts in its favor). Hence, Greene concludes that it is better to let moral reasoning guide our moral judgments (consequentialism) than to relinquish control to our moral emotions and intuitions (deontology). Suppose that our characteristically deontological moral judgments really are the product of intuitive, emotionally-charged cognitive processes. Does it follow that deontology must fail as a philosophical theory? While the overall structure of Greene’s argument is pretty clear, it

\textsuperscript{15}Greene (Forthcoming A: 11)
\textsuperscript{16}Greene et al. (2004: 389)
is hard to see how the details are supposed to work. In this section I’ll consider two arguments hovering in the vicinity, rejecting each in turn. I devote the final section of the paper to a third argument that I take to cut to the heart of the issue: the moral relevance argument.

Before considering the arguments, however, I’d like to say a bit about the scope of Greene’s philosophical claim. Greene frames his argument as an attack on normative deontology. But it seems to me that if Greene’s attack succeeds, then some collateral damage will result. One need not be a deontologist to hold that the intuitions driving our characteristically deontological moral judgments carry some normative weight. Although deontological moral theories are plausibly seen as a way of codifying the relevant moral intuitions in terms of moral rules and principles, the intuitions themselves might have some normative weight independently of any resulting moral theory. For example, Woodward and Allman claim that even if subjects are unable to provide a systematic justification or ‘rational reconstruction’ of the underlying basis for their intuitions (as many utilitarians suppose), those intuitions may still contain useful information and be normatively defensible.17 Friends of moral intuitionism and moral perceptualism more generally will tend to value the kinds of intuitions that Greene seeks to discredit, independently of whether they are friends of normative deontology.

For example, Dreyfus and Dreyfus downplay the role of moral reasoning, and emphasize the role of intuition in ethical behavior: “It seems that beginners make judgments using strict rules and features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experience the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively what to do without applying rules and making judgments at all.”18 On the Dreyfus brothers’ view, acting morally is an acquired skill, similar to playing chess or driving a car. Moral reasoning only serves as a temporary solution, until an agent acquires the skill necessary to act on intuition alone. On the Dreyfus brothers’ view, the relevant moral skill(s) cannot be adequately specified by systems of rules (e.g. ‘Never tell lies’, ‘Always maximize good

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17 Woodward and Allman (Unpublished: 22)
18 Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1990: 243)
consequences’). Paul Churchland holds a similar view, emphasizing the perceptual character of moral cognition and de-emphasizing the importance of moral rules. “There is no hope, to repeat the point, that we can capture the true substance of any human’s moral knowledge by citing some family of ‘rules’ that he or she is supposed to ‘follow’, nor any hope of evaluating that person’s character by evaluating the specific rules within any such internalized family [of rules].”19 On the face of it, neither the Dreyfus brothers nor Churchland are committed to normative deontology. But both seem to value automatic, behaviorally valenced moral cognition (to the exclusion of “cognitive” rule-based moral reasoning). So there are at least a few examples of non-deontologists who want to respect moral intuition in one way or another. To be fair, Greene does note that “the arguments... cast doubt on the moral intuitions in question regardless of whether one wishes to justify them in abstract terms,” but he mentions this only in passing.20 I just want to point out that while Greene frames the discussion almost entirely in terms of normative consequentialism versus normative deontology, as a matter of fact his conclusions are rather more far-reaching. Now, on to the arguments.

2.1 The Coincidence Argument

Greene assumes that “our most basic moral dispositions are evolutionary adaptations that arose in response to the demands and opportunities created by social life,” and sometimes discusses moral intuitions in terms of their biological adaptiveness (or maladaptiveness).21 For example, he says the following about punishment and the moral emotions:

[T]he emotions that drive us to punish are blunt biological instruments. They evolved because they drive us to punish in ways that lead to (biologically) good consequences. But, as a by-product of their simple and efficient design, they also lead us to punish in situations in which no (biologically) good consequences can be expected. Thus, it seems that, as an evolutionary matter of fact, we have a taste for retribution, not because wrong-doers truly deserve to be punished regardless of the costs and benefits, but because retributive dispositions are an efficient

19 Churchland (2000: 298)
20 Greene (Forthcoming C: 51-52)
21 Greene (Forthcoming C: 33)
way of inducing behavior that allows individuals living in social groups to more effectively spread their genes.\textsuperscript{22}

If we follow Greene in supposing that our moral intuitions are biological adaptations (which is a pretty plausible supposition), then what follows? There are at least two arguments from this premise to the conclusion that we should doubt our moral intuitions.

Let’s first consider the argument that Timmons dubs “the coincidence argument.”\textsuperscript{23} Greene notes that “as an empirical matter of fact... there is a remarkable correspondence between what rationalist deontological theories tell us to do and what our emotions tell us to do. Thus, in light of this data, there are a series of coincidences for which various rationalist deontologists must account.”\textsuperscript{24} Supposing that there is a mind-independent realm of moral principles (as rationalist deontologists tend to believe), it would indeed be a miraculous coincidence if the essentially random process of biological evolution happened to endow us with moral intuitions that hooked up in just the right way to just the right set of moral principles. In the face of the apparent coincidence, the burden is on the deontologist to explain the connection between the moral intuitions and the moral principles. Kant might have been tempted to respond to the coincidence argument by appealing to the hand of god: “God’s a smart guy, Kant must have thought. He wouldn’t give people moral intuitions \textit{willy nilly}.”\textsuperscript{25} In other words, god could ensure that our moral intuitions hook up with the moral principles in the right way. Many contemporary theorists find this kind of story implausible, and indeed, Kant himself eschewed explicit appeals divine intervention in his philosophy. Timmons suggests that a contemporary deontologist might fend off the coincidence argument by adopting a constructivist or sentimentalist variety of deontology, on which the moral principles are not robustly mind-independent (e.g. Scanlon’s view).\textsuperscript{26} If the moral principles are \textit{grounded} in our moral intuitions, then it’s no coincidence that our intuitions track the principles. In

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{22} Greene (Forthcoming C: 46)
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Timmons (Forthcoming: 4)
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Greene (Forthcoming C: 43)
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Greene (Forthcoming C: 44)
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Timmons (Forthcoming: 4-5)
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effect, Timmons is pointing out that Greene’s coincidence argument only works against hard-core realist varieties of deontology, on which the moral principles enjoy a completely mind-independent existence. Greene attempts to save the coincidence argument by appealing to the GIGO principle (garbage in, garbage out), but in my view the attempt fails.\textsuperscript{27} I suspect that the GIGO response begs the question against friends of moral intuition, though we’ll have to bracket the issue for the moment. We’ll return to the GIGO response later on, in Section 3.

2.2 The Adaptation Argument

I’d like to draw attention to a second argument from evolutionary premises that enjoys some \textit{prima facie} plausibility: call it the \textit{adaptation argument}. Greene doesn’t explicitly advance this argument, but it comes to mind quite naturally when considering the evolutionary history of our moral intuitions. Suppose that human moral intuitions tracked physical property \( P \) in the evolutionary environment (10 million years ago, or whatever), and that the tracking of property \( P \) led to higher rates of reproductive success (or biological fitness). Further suppose that our moral intuitions \textit{still} track property \( P \), but the tracking of \( P \) no longer leads to higher rates of reproductive success (or biological fitness). So the tracking function is no longer adaptive, and neither are our moral intuitions. From this back story, one can extract the following argument for Greene’s philosophical claim:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textbf{A1} Our gut-reaction moral intuitions are \textit{adaptations}; that is, they evolved because they led to biologically good consequences.
\item \textbf{A2} Although gut-reaction moral intuitions were adaptive at one time (in the evolutionary environment), they are no longer adaptive in our current environment.
\item \textbf{A3} We should refrain from trusting cognitive processes that are maladaptive with respect to the environment in which we currently reside.
\end{enumerate}

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\therefore \text{We should refrain from trusting our gut-reaction moral intuitions.}
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\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Greene (Forthcoming B: 10-11)}
I think that this line of argument is promising. The adaptation argument purports to debase moral intuition in a way that clearly does not presuppose the truth of consequentialism. It proceeds from premises that do not involve any particular conception of moral relevance, moral goodness, or other morally loaded notions (moral intuition is the only moral concept involved). Unfortunately, Greene can’t plausibly endorse the argument, given his fierce anti-realism about the moral domain. In particular, the analogy that Greene draws between moral intuitions and sexiness intuitions blocks him from accepting premise three of the argument.

[M]oral experience has a perceptual phenomenology because natural selection has outfitted us with mechanisms for making intuitive, emotion-based moral judgements [sic], much as it has outfitted us with mechanisms for making intuitive, emotion-based judgements [sic] about who among us are the most suitable mates... moral realism is akin to naive realism about sexiness.\(^{28}\)

Nature doesn’t leave it to us to figure out that fellow humans are more suitable mates than baboons. Instead, it endows us with a psychology that makes certain humans strike us as very appealing sexual partners, and makes baboons seem frightfully unappealing in this regard. And finally, Nature doesn’t leave it to us to figure out that saving a drowning child is a good thing to do. Instead, it endows us with a powerful “moral sense” that compels us to engage in this sort of behavior (under the right circumstances).\(^{29}\)

The problem with the analogy is that in the case of sexiness, we tend to give authoritative weight to our sexiness intuitions, even when we know that the properties tracked by those intuitions are not generally conducive to reproductive success (or biological fitness). Individuals are sometimes judged to be sexy on the basis of features that clearly do not contribute to reproductive success (or biological fitness more broadly): Suppose that our sexiness intuitions track the presence of overall body shape S (for simplicity’s sake, suppose that body shape S is the only property so tracked), and that having body shape S was a good indicator of biological fitness in the evolutionary environment. Person Y has body shape S, and person X intuitively judges Y to be sexy. But Y has achieved body shape S by means of plastic surgery, which is relatively common. If body shape S is achieved by means plastic surgery, then it is not conducive to biological fitness (suppose). Intuitively, we want

\(^{28}\)Greene (2003: 849)
\(^{29}\)Greene (Forthcoming C: 33)
to say that X’s intuitive judgment about the sexiness of Y is authoritative. In other words, we do not want to say that X is subject to any “illusion of sexiness,” or that nose jobs and so forth can’t really make people more sexy (if this were the case, then the plastic surgery industry would be in trouble). Nor do we want to say that X’s sexiness intuitions are untrustworthy due to a lack of proper functioning, for they are still reliably tracking body shape S. It’s just that in the current environment, body shape S is no longer a reliable indicator of biological fitness (due in large part to advances in medicine). If our sexiness intuitions are relevantly analogous to our moral intuitions, then we ought to say that our moral intuitions are extremely trustworthy. Even when faced with evidence that our moral intuitions do not contribute to overall biological fitness, we ought to regard the intuitions as authoritative.

If our moral intuitions are authoritative, then it looks like premise A3 of the adaptation argument must be false. In order for Greene to pursue a version of the argument, he would need to point out some relevant disanalogy between sexiness intuitions and moral intuitions, such that the former are authoritative while the latter are not. This is not out of the question. While Greene points out many respects in which sexiness and morality appear to be similar, he may yet be able to produce a relevant disanalogy. In any case, I don’t think that Greene intends to pursue the adaptation argument: “We need to distinguish ‘adaptive’ in the amoral biological sense from ‘adaptive’ as a term of moral approbation. The latter is the one that concerns normative ethics. I presume that the both systems were adaptive in the biological sense at one time. Hard to say about nowadays. But I argue that the intuitive emotional responses may be maladaptive in the moral sense.”30 These comments seem to commit Greene to the denial of premise A2 of the adaptation argument, for he withholds judgment on whether moral intuitions are adaptive in the current environment. The comments also serve as a nice segue into the moral relevance argument. What is it to be maladaptive in the moral sense? The analogous notion of biological adaptiveness is notoriously slippery, we have at least some grip on the concept: to be adaptive in the biological sense is to contribute to reproductive

30Greene, email correspondence
success in some capacity. Presumably, to be adaptive in the moral sense is to contribute to the moral good in some way. But what kinds of considerations are relevant to the moral good?

3 The Moral Relevance Argument

Greene frequently makes use of a notion of moral relevance (or moral irrelevance). According to Greene, “there are good reasons to think that our distinctively deontological moral intuitions (here, the ones that conflict with consequentialism) reflect the influence of morally irrelevant factors, and are therefore unlikely to track the moral truth.”31 Which factors are “morally irrelevant” factors? In characterizing moral irrelevance, Greene appeals again to the arbitrary character of evolution. Our moral intuitions “appear to have been shaped by morally irrelevant factors having to do with the constraints and circumstances of our evolutionary history.”32 We can formulate the moral relevance argument more perspicuously as an instance of modus ponens:

- **R1** If a cognitive process is shaped by arbitrary evolutionary constraints, then that cognitive process is morally irrelevant.
- **R2** Moral intuitions are shaped by arbitrary evolutionary constraints.

∴ Moral intuitions are morally irrelevant.

Since the moral relevance argument is an instance of modus ponens, it is clearly valid. Note, however, that we can construct an analogous argument for the conclusion that consequentialist-style “cognitive” moral reasonings are morally irrelevant, by replacing the string ‘moral intuitions’ with the string ‘moral reasonings’ throughout. Further, we have every reason to believe that consequentialist moral reasonings are just as much a product of evolution as deontological moral intuitions. So the moral relevance argument is equally applicable to both deontological moral intuitions and consequentialist moral reasonings. But if the argument is sound, then it does too much work,

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31 Greene (Forthcoming C: 45)
32 Greene (Forthcoming C: 52)
leaving us without a moral leg to stand on: all moral cognition is morally irrelevant, because it’s plausible that all moral cognition is a product of evolutionary constraints. One might reasonably reject R1 and say that the argument is unsound, thus escaping moral nihilism. But if the moral relevance argument is unsound, then it fails to do the work of showing that moral intuitions are irrelevant. If Greene were to reject R1, then he would be left without an argument, and his claim that moral intuitions are morally irrelevant would be question-begging.

Greene deploys the moral relevance argument several times over, and under different guises. One instance of the argument is Greene’s GIGO response to Timmons. Timmons suggests the possibility of a deontological theory that is grounded in gut-reaction moral intuitions (see “the coincidence argument” in Section 2 above). A deontologist might produce a constructivist theory “that takes us from unreflective intuitive judgments to a set of moral judgments which, ideally at least, constitute moral truth.”33 Such a theory would involve a kind of construction-function that takes moral intuitions as inputs, and yields a moral theory as output. Greene replies that constructivism is subject to the problem of GIGO (garbage in, garbage out). The basic idea behind GIGO is that if we begin the constructive process with intuitive moral judgments that are garbage, then the moral theory we arrive at will turn out to be garbage as well. But how are we supposed to know whether the initial intuitive judgments really are garbage? By means of the moral relevance argument, of course: “The so-called ‘moral truth’... reflects arbitrary features of our evolutionary history. GIGO.”34 But as we saw above, the moral relevance argument is either unsound or self-undermining. Since the moral relevance argument is plausibly unsound, it looks like Greene’s claims of moral irrelevance are question-begging.

33Timmons (Forthcoming: 4), my emphasis
34Greene (Forthcoming B: 10)
3.1 The Moral Relevance Argument as *Ad Hominem*?

Could the moral relevance argument be recast in a less obviously question-begging fashion? I think that the answer is yes. We might recast the moral relevance argument as a kind of *ad hominem* argument, rather than as an instance of *modus ponens*. While *ad hominem* arguments are generally fallacious, they can be legitimate when deployed as part of an attack on the character of a witness or reliability of a source of evidence (as opposed to an direct attack on the truth of a claim). Perhaps Greene has something like this in mind. When he claims that “our moral intuitions are influenced by arbitrary features of our evolutionary history,” perhaps Greene intends to place the emphasis on the ‘arbitrary’ rather than on the ‘history’. That is, perhaps Greene is not asserting that *every* product of evolution must be morally irrelevant. Instead, he is pointing to particular features of the evolutionary environment that influenced the development of our moral intuitions, and saying of those features, “Gee, don’t those particular features look arbitrary?” On this reading, the argument is a kind of *ad hominem* because it calls into question the source of our moral intuitions in a manner relevantly similar to questioning the character of a witness. Unfortunately, the *ad hominem* understanding of the moral relevance argument does not fare much better than the *modus ponens* understanding.

The problem is that even on the *ad hominem* reading, the argument still turns out to be circular. Greene asks us to consider the evolutionary history of our moral intuitions, and he suspects that we will intuitively find that history to be morally arbitrary. He also suspects that when given a similar story about the evolutionary history of our more “cognitive” reasoning abilities, we will regard that history as morally non-arbitrary. If we agree with Greene on the intuitive arbitrariness/non-

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35 Thanks to Mark Timmons and Matt Bedke for pointing this out in conversation.
36 There is another *ad hominem* argument in the vicinity that Greene might be making. Perhaps he is suggesting that rationalist deontologists themselves regard emotional moral intuitions as morally irrelevant (*a la* Kant). Hence, *by their own lights*, rationalist deontologists have reason to doubt their moral intuitions. But if Greene’s empirical claim is true, then moral intuitions often play a role in causing characteristically deontological moral judgments. So rationalist deontologists have reason to doubt their own theory. I think that this kind of argument is promising line of attack against rationalist deontologists. However, it will not work against deontology broadly construed; in particular, a deontologist who is willing to “go sentimentalist” (as Timmons suggests) can escape the argument.
arbitrariness of the respective evolutionary histories, then we will also agree with his conclusion that our moral intuitions are untrustworthy. But why should anybody agree that the history of our moral intuitions is arbitrary, and that the history of our “cognitive” abilities is non-arbitrary? That is, why should we hold that features like physical proximity, physical contact and so forth are morally arbitrary, and that the analogous features regarding moral reasoning are non-arbitrary? It seems that we have no principled way of deciding which features of the evolutionary environment are arbitrary. In the absence of some principled way of deciding which evolutionary histories are morally arbitrary, the appeal to ad hominem merely pushes the circularity back a step. At the end of the day, it is hard to find a decent argument capable of supporting Greene’s moral irrelevance claims, and I suggest that he doesn’t really offer any such argument. Instead, Greene is merely asserting that deontological moral intuitions are morally irrelevant, where a deontologist would be equally entitled to assert the same of consequentialist moral reasoning.

3.2 When Cognitive Processes Collide

You might think that accusing Greene of begging the question is something of a cheap shot, or even a straw man. I’ll admit that it may be a bit of cheap shot, but by my lights it is no straw man. Perhaps I could have worked harder to apply a principle of charity, massaging Greene’s argument into something non-circular. However, I think that there is something interesting to be said about just how the circularity arises. When Greene says that “deontological moral intuitions are sensitive to morally irrelevant factors,” he is banking on the fact that many of us will agree with him. Sure enough, many of us do find it plausible on reflection that “up close and personal” factors such as physical proximity are not morally relevant. Nonetheless, many of us still find ourselves inclined to give our deontological moral intuitions some normative weight when considering trolley-style cases (not to mention real life situations). Why is it that we are torn in this way?

If we want to know whether to trust our judgments of moral relevance, we need to take notice of where those judgments originate. Presumably judgments of moral relevance are caused by
some cognitive process or other (just like our judgments of moral rightness or wrongness). Which
cognitive processes play a role in causing our judgments of moral relevance? I suggest that some of
the same processes responsible for causing our judgments of moral rightness or wrongness might
also play a role in causing our judgments of moral relevance. When we take the time to reflect
carefully upon the evolutionary origins of our moral intuitions, it is often the case that our moral
intuitions seem morally arbitrary, and that our “cognitive” moral reasoning seems morally relevant.
If, at the time of the relevance-judgment, one is engaged in a process of rational reflection, then
the judgment of moral relevance is plausibly caused by “cognitive” cognitive processes. But if
Greene’s dual process model of moral cognition is correct, then consequentialist moral intuitions
themselves are also caused by “cognitive” cognitive processes. It wouldn’t be altogether surprising
if the very same cognitive mechanism that yielded the moral judgments regarded those judgments
as morally relevant, and regarded moral judgments originating from other cognitive mechanisms as
morally irrelevant. In effect, the “cognitive” centers are shouting, “Physical proximity is a morally
arbitrary factor!” Similar considerations apply to snap-judgments of moral relevance. Plausibly,
we can make quick, intuitive judgments of moral relevance. After hearing an evolutionary story
about the origins of our moral intuitions, one might make a snap judgment regarding the moral
relevance of certain features of the evolutionary environment. Plausibly, such a snap-judgment
would be (at least in part) caused by intuitive cognitive processes. Hence it would be no surprise
if factors like physical proximity seemed relevant according to the standards of these processes. In
effect, the intuitive processes are shouting, “Physical proximity is a morally relevant factor!”

The claim on the table here is that whether one judges some feature of the evolutionary envi-
ronment to be morally relevant depends on which cognitive process one uses to do the relevance-
evaluation. If the relevance-evaluation is carried out by a “cognitive” process, then consequentialist
considerations will dominate. If the relevance-evaluation is carried out by an emotional process,
then deontological considerations will dominate. The respective processes like to toot their own
horns. But at present there is no clear way to adjudicate between the two processes. We can reflect
on the matter, but in doing so we are merely relying on our “cognitive” processes; and relying exclusively on “cognitive” processes will surely affect the outcome of the inquiry (and *mutatis mutandis* if we rely exclusively on our intuitions). Is there any hope of resolving the matter? Perhaps, but if we take seriously Greene’s claim that the debate between consequentialists and deontologists is rooted in a tension between competing subsystems of the brain, then we should not expect a solution anytime soon. And certainly we should not consider deontology to be vanquished.
4 References


