

# Moral intuitions: Are philosophers experts?

Kevin Tobia, Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich

*Psychologists and experimental philosophers have reported findings showing that in some cases ordinary people's moral intuitions are affected by factors of dubious relevance to the truth of the intuition. Some defend the use of intuition as evidence in ethics by arguing that philosophers are the experts in this area, and philosophers' moral intuitions are both different from those of ordinary people and more reliable. We conducted two experiments indicating that philosophers and non-philosophers do indeed sometimes have different moral intuitions, but challenging the notion that philosophers have better or more reliable intuitions.*

*Keywords:* Actor-Observer Bias; Expertise Defense; Intuition

## 1. Introduction

Philosophers commonly characterize a moral intuition as “a strong immediate moral belief” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, p. 47) or “a spontaneous moral judgment” (McMahan, 2000, p. 94). There is a longstanding and widespread practice of using moral intuitions as evidence in moral arguments. One very well known example is Thomson’s (1985) organ transplant case, in which a doctor can save five patients needing organ transplants by sacrificing a young healthy patient with compatible organs. When presented with this case, most people have the intuition that the doctor should *not* perform the transplant. This intuition is taken to be evidence for the wrongness of such an action, and that conclusion may be used to challenge a broader moral theory. In the organ transplant case, the intuition that sacrificing the man is wrong may be used to challenge some versions of Act Utilitarianism.

Some ethicists, though, have been critical of the use of intuitions as evidence for moral claims (e.g., Greene, 2007; Rachels, 1979). Utilitarians in particular often

---

Kevin Tobia is a philosophy student at Rutgers University.

Wesley Buckwalter is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Stephen Stich is a Board of Governors Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University.

Correspondence to: Kevin Tobia, Department of Philosophy, Rutgers University, 1 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. Email: [kevin.tobia@gmail.com](mailto:kevin.tobia@gmail.com)

question or reject the use of moral intuitions as evidence (Norcross, 1997; Singer, 1974; Unger, 1996). Recently, these criticisms have been buttressed by research in social psychology and experimental philosophy, which has shown that ordinary people's moral intuitions are influenced by a variety of factors including order effects (e.g., Liao, Wiegmann, Alexander, & Vong, forthcoming; Lombrozo, 2009), framing effects (e.g., Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996), and environmental variables (e.g., Helzer & Pizarro, 2011). Since it is widely agreed that those factors are irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the intuition, these empirical results cast doubt on the use of intuition as evidence for moral claims.

## 2. The Expertise Defense

One common strategy for responding to these experimentally based critiques of the use of intuitions as evidence in ethics, and in philosophy more generally, is to insist that the intuitions being tested in the experiments are not the philosophically relevant intuitions (Hales, 2006; Ludwig, 2007; Williamson, 2005). The participants in almost all of these studies have been ordinary "folk"—usually university undergraduates. But, the objection continues, in moral philosophy as in other areas, the intuitions we should rely on are the intuitions of experts; and in ethics, the experts are *philosophers* (Crosthwaite, 1995; Singer, 1972). Because of their training and ability, it is claimed, it is much less likely that philosophers' moral intuitions will be significantly influenced by the sorts of irrelevant factors that influence the intuitions of philosophically unsophisticated experimental participants. So, while it may be interesting and important to know that non-philosophers' moral intuitions are affected by irrelevant factors, this does little to undermine the use of moral intuitions as evidence in philosophy, since the intuitions that philosophers usually rely on are philosophers' intuitions.

Because intuitions of philosophers are different from and better than those of "the folk," the expertise defense claims, experimental results about ordinary people's intuitions do not discredit the use of philosophers' intuitions as evidence in philosophy. However, following Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner, and Alexander (2010), it is important to note that this line of argument employs two substantial empirical claims. In order for this "expertise defense" to succeed, it must be the case that philosophers' intuitions are both (i) different from and (ii) better than those of ordinary people. That is, the moral intuitions of philosophers must be different from the moral intuitions of non-philosopher experimental participants, *and* it must be less likely that the moral intuitions of philosophers are significantly influenced by factors that are irrelevant to the truth of these intuitions.

## 3. The Actor-Observer Bias

There is evidence in the literature suggesting that in some cases philosophers' intuitions are neither different from nor more reliable than those of

non-philosophers, though these findings are limited. Previous research has uncovered that philosophers' intuitions are in some cases subject to order effects (Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012), and that the possession of a personality trait, namely extraversion, can predict some intuitions of philosophers (Schulz, Cokely, & Feltz, 2011). However, there is little data on whether or not philosophers' intuitions are stable or malleable in the face of other psychological effects, such as framing effects.

One particular type of framing effect that has been widely explored in other areas is called the "Actor-Observer bias" (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Fielder, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Saulnier & Perlman, 1981). In many cases, people will respond differently to scenarios depending on whether the scenario is presented in the first or third person—whether the experimental participant is depicted as the actor or the observer. This effect is important in assessing the use of intuitions as evidence in philosophy, since a difference in responses between actor and observer conditions is *prima facie* problematic. When participants exhibit the Actor-Observer bias in response to moral scenarios, the intuitive judgments they offer when they are the agent differ from the intuitive judgments they make when they are the observer. But whether an action in a moral scenario is framed in first or third person terms is almost always irrelevant to a moral judgment about the action. So if a participant judges that an action is morally permissible in the first person (actor) condition, she should also judge that the action is morally permissible in the third person (observer) condition, and vice versa. There would be very few proponents of a moral theory with an asymmetry permitting or prohibiting certain actions for only you. So if participants' intuitive judgments about a case are susceptible to the Actor-Observer bias, we have good reason to think that intuitions are unreliable.

#### 4. The Experiments

We conducted two experiments to compare the moral intuitions of philosophers with those of non-philosophers. The non-philosophers were Rutgers University undergraduates surveyed in classrooms between January and June of 2011; the professional philosophers were surveyed at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Conference in April, 2011. In each of the two experiments, participants received either an Actor or an Observer condition of a moral scenario and corresponding questions about the scenario. Respondents then completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

##### *4.1. Jim and the Natives: A Question of Moral Obligation*

In the first experiment, participants in the Actor condition received the following vignette from Smart and Williams:

You find yourself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are twenty natives, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them

several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning which establishes that you got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the natives are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind the other possible protesters of the advantages of not protesting. However, since you are an honored visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer you a guest's privilege of killing one of the natives yourself. If you accept, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other natives will be let off. Of course, if you refuse, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when you arrived, and kill them all. With some desperate recollection of childhood fiction, you wonder whether if you got hold of the gun, you could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers at bay, but it is quite clear from the circumstances that nothing of that kind is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that you will also be killed along with all of the natives. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are obviously begging you to accept. What should you do? (1973, p. 98)

Participants were then asked a series of 'yes' or 'no' questions about the scenario, the first of which was:

Do you think that in these circumstances you are morally obligated to shoot and kill the one native in order to save the others?

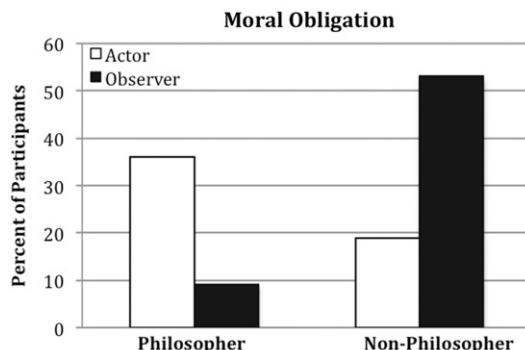
Participants in the Observer condition received the same vignette and questions, except all instances of 'you' were replaced with 'Jim'.<sup>1</sup>

Forty undergraduates and 62 professional philosophers with a PhD in philosophy were presented with this moral dilemma in either the Actor (1st person) or Observer (3rd person) condition. The result was that significant framing effects were found between members of both groups. Among the undergraduates, 19% rated the agent's proposed action as morally obligatory for themselves in the Actor condition while 53% in the Observer condition rated the action as morally obligatory for 'Jim' (Fisher's exact test,  $p < 0.05$ , all tests two-tailed). Among the professional philosophers, a significant difference between conditions was also found, but it was in the opposite direction! In the Actor condition, 36% rated the action as morally obligatory while only 9% rated it obligatory for 'Jim' in the Observer condition (Fisher's exact test,  $p < 0.05$ ). These results are shown in figure 1 below.

#### *4.2. The Trolley Switch Case: A Question of Moral Permissibility*

In the second experiment, we surveyed professional philosophers with either the Actor or Observer condition of the Trolley Case used by Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2008). The following vignette is the Actor case, with the Observer changes in brackets:

A trolley is hurtling down the tracks. There are five workers on the track ahead of the trolley, and they will definitely be killed if the trolley continues going straight ahead since they won't have enough time to get out of harm's way. There is a spur of track leading off to the side where another person is working. The brakes of the



**Figure 1.** Percent of professional philosophers and undergraduates responding ‘yes’ to the moral obligation question.

trolley have failed and there is a switch which can be thrown to cause the trolley to go to the side track.

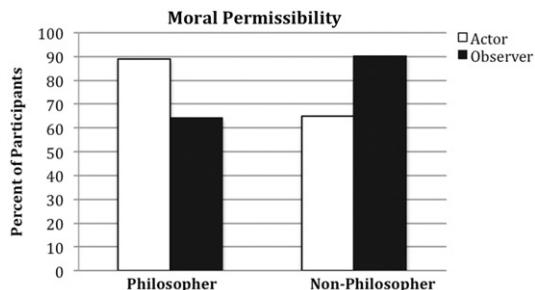
Imagine that you are [John is] an innocent bystander who happens to be standing next to the switch. You realize [John realizes] that if you do [he does] nothing, five people will definitely die. On the other hand, you realize [John realizes] that if you throw [John throws] the switch, you [John] will definitely save the five workers. However, you are [John is] also aware that in doing so the worker on the side track will definitely be killed as the result of your [John’s] actions.

Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2008) presented these scenarios to undergraduates, who then answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions about whether they thought it is morally permissible for either ‘you’ or ‘John’ to throw the switch:

Even if you don’t think that you have a moral *obligation* to throw the switch, is it nevertheless morally *permissible* for you to kill the one in order to save the five?

What they found was evidence for a bias similar to the one non-philosophers exhibited in response to the moral obligation question in our Jim and the Natives experiment above. In the Actor condition, 65% of the undergraduates answered “yes” while in the Observer condition, 90% answered “yes.”

Given this pattern of Actor-Observer bias in the judgments of non-philosophers, we were curious to see whether the intuitions of professional philosophers would display a framing effect for moral permissibility similar to the one found for moral obligation in the Jim and the Natives experiment. That is exactly what we found. When 49 professional philosophers were presented with this scenario, they displayed a significant Actor-Observer bias *opposite* to that of the undergraduates surveyed by Nadelhoffer and Feltz: 89% of philosophers in the Actor condition responded that the action was permissible, while 64% in the Observer condition answered that the action was permissible (Fisher’s exact test,  $p < 0.05$ ). These results, along with the original findings from non-philosophers by Nadelhoffer and Feltz, are shown in figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.** Percent of professional philosophers and undergraduates responding ‘yes’ to the moral permissibility question.

## 5. Implications

Our two main findings are (i) that both the non-philosophers and professional philosophers are subject to a type of framing effect, the Actor-Observer bias, when making judgments of moral permissibility and moral obligation, and (ii) that the direction of this bias reverses between groups. These results pose a challenge to the expertise defense by demonstrating that professional philosophers *are* subject to a type of framing effect, and thus that philosophers’ intuitions are significantly influenced by factors that are irrelevant to the truth of the intuition. Although philosopher’s intuitions are indeed different, the difference is not that the Actor-Observer bias disappears, as a defender of the use of philosophers’ intuitions as evidence might hope, but that it is still there—in the opposite direction!

Of course, advocates of the expertise defense need not, and typically do not, insist that philosophers’ intuitions are entirely immune from framing effects, or that they are never influenced by other factors that are irrelevant to the truth of the intuition. Their claim is only that philosophers’ intuitions are *substantially less likely* to be influenced by such factors. Though our results certainly do not refute that claim, they do, begin to shift the burden of argument. If an advocate of the expertise defense contends that, despite our results, philosophers’ intuitions are much less likely to be subject to framing effects and other problematic influences, he must show that there are a number of other cases in which the intuitions of ordinary folk are subject to framing effects and other problematic influences, and philosophers’ intuitions are not. Stomping one’s foot and insisting that philosophers are experts simply will not do. The issue is an empirical one. And at this point, we submit, the advocates of the expertise defense need to offer some empirical evidence that supports their view.

Another way in which an advocate of the expertise defense might react to our findings is to maintain that even if the intuitions of philosophers and non-philosophers are subject to much the same cognitive biases and other problematic influences, it is still possible that when these biases and problematic influences are not playing a role, philosophers’ intuitions are much more reliable. Though we grant that this is indeed *possible*, here again the advocate of the expertise defense has some work to do. It is not enough to say that philosophers’ intuitions *might* be more

reliable. What is needed is some evidence that they are. And when the intuitions in question are *moral* intuitions, it is far from clear how that evidence *could* be provided, since there is no generally accepted method of assessing the truth of moral claims, and most methods that philosophers find attractive involve an appeal to moral intuitions. We most definitely do not maintain that evidence of the sort required *cannot* be provided. Perhaps some clever defender of philosophical intuitions will come up with a way to do it. What we do maintain is that, here too, advocates of the expertise defense need to offer some evidence of their own. The ball is in their court.

## 6. Objections and Replies

One objection to our conclusion may be to argue that because only *ethicists* have expert moral intuitions, the data here do not pose a challenge to the expertise defense, since they represent the intuitions of a wide range of philosophers, including metaphysicians, philosophers of language, epistemologists, etc., rather than only those of ethicists. The objection is well taken. There are several versions of the expertise defense available, and our target is the version that claims that professional philosophers, as a group, are experts in moral intuition, and that their moral intuitions are much more likely to be correct than the intuitions of non-philosophers. Our findings do not pose a significant challenge to the advocate of the expertise defense who maintains that only professional ethicists are experts in moral intuition. To assess that version of the expertise defense, additional empirical work will be needed. Similarly, one might object that our results do not challenge the use of intuition as evidence in *all branches of philosophy*, since our vignettes elicit only moral intuitions. Here again, the objection is well taken. Our experiments focused on moral intuitions, and as Nado (2011) has argued, there is no reason to suppose that the psychological processes underlying moral intuitions are similar to the psychological processes underlying intuitions in other areas of philosophy. To assess the expertise defense in other branches of philosophy, additional empirical work will be needed.

A second cluster of objections focuses on our claim that the first or third person framing of the moral scenarios is a morally irrelevant factor that does not affect the truth of the intuitions about those scenarios. One might be tempted to reply that, contrary to our assertion, the first or third person framing of these scenarios *is* a morally relevant feature; perhaps what we have uncovered is not an Actor-Observer bias, but merely an Actor-Observer asymmetry. This suggestion, that person framing is *by itself* a morally relevant feature, is more than a bit implausible since, all other things being equal, there seems to be no non-arbitrary justification of why an act would be morally permissible or obligatory for one person but not for another.

There is, however, a subtler version of this objection available. Perhaps the first or third person framing of the experimental scenarios is, by itself, a morally irrelevant feature, but is also one that tracks some morally relevant feature. To support this type

of response to our data, a defender of the expertise defense must make an empirical claim about some feature tracked by the Actor-Observer distinction. Perhaps, for example, many philosophers believe that while they act with morally appropriate motives, ordinary people (like Jim and John in our vignettes) typically do not. If that were the case, then one might argue that while the person-framing of a moral scenario is itself a morally irrelevant factor, it is tracking the morally relevant factor of proper motivation. There are a (potentially endless) number of alternative hypothesis of this sort: philosophers might believe themselves to have better motives, a stronger obligation to take on morally challenging tasks, superior moral reasoning ability, or a host of other features.

But those who seek to insulate the expertise defense from the challenge we have posed by invoking one of these hypotheses take on a pair of burdens. First, they must show that many philosophers do indeed believe themselves to have better moral motives, a stronger obligation to take on morally challenging tasks, or superior moral reasoning ability than ordinary people like Jim and John. Second, they must show that, typically at least, these beliefs are *true*. Appealing to false beliefs held by philosophers does not save the expertise defense, but rather seems to provide another strike against the expertise of philosophers. While we know of no evidence that bears directly on these claims, some recent empirical work suggests that ethicists behave no more ethically than non-ethicists (Schwitzgebel, 2009), and that philosophers do not believe ethicists to behave substantially more ethically than other philosophers (Schwitzgebel & Rust, 2009). The bottom line, we submit, is that those who think that the Actor versus Observer framing of our scenarios tracks some morally relevant feature have their work cut out for them. They must offer some empirical evidence that many philosophers believe (for example) that they are more likely than ordinary folk to act with morally appropriate motives, and they must go on to show that this belief is true.

## 7. Conclusion

In the debate over the use of intuitions as evidence in philosophy, a frequent criticism of those who rely on the results of experimental philosophy research is that the experiments are looking at the wrong intuitions. Professional philosophers, it is claimed, have different intuitions from the intuitions of typical undergraduate participants in these studies, and the intuitions of professional philosophers are better evidence since they are less susceptible to influence by irrelevant factors. The two experiments we have reported demonstrate that there is indeed a difference between philosophers' intuitions and the intuitions of non-philosophers. But the difference is not what the defenders of the use of philosophers' intuitions suppose. In these two cases, at least, philosophers *are* subject to the Actor-Observer bias, but the direction of the bias is reversed. We hope that further research will provide insight into the causes of this difference and investigate the extent to which philosophers' intuitions exhibit problematic variability in other cases.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Rutgers Honors Program and the Aresty Research Center for funding this research. We are grateful to three anonymous reviewers who raised the objections addressed in section 6, and who drew our attention to a number of other issues that we have addressed elsewhere in this paper.

## Note

- [1] In both the vignette and questions the relevant pronouns and verbs were also modified to a third-person reading.

## References

- Choi, I., & Nisbett, R. (1998). Situational salience and cultural differences in the correspondence bias and actor–observer bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 9, 949–960.
- Crosthwaite, J. (1995). Moral expertise: A problem in the professional ethics of professional ethicists. *Bioethics*, 9, 361–379.
- Fiedler, K., Semin, G., Finkenauer, C., & Berkel, I. (1995). Actor-Observer bias in close relationships: The role of self-knowledge and self-language. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 525–538.
- Greene, J.D. (2007). The secret joke of Kant's soul. In W. Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral psychology: Vol. 3, The neuroscience of morality: Emotion, disease, and development* (pp. 35–80). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hales, S.D. (2006). *Relativism and the foundations of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Helzer, E., & Pizarro, D.A. (2011). Dirty liberals! Reminders of cleanliness promote conservative political and moral attitudes. *Psychological Science*, 22, 517–522.
- Jones, E., & Nisbett, R. (1971). *The actor and the observer: Divergent perceptions of the causes of behavior*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Liao, M., Wiegmann, A., Alexander, J., & Vong, G. (forthcoming). Putting the trolley in order: Experimental philosophy and the loop case. *Philosophical Psychology*, DOI: 10.1080/09515089.2011.627536.
- Lombrozo, T. (2009). The role of moral commitments in moral judgment. *Cognitive Science*, 33, 273–286.
- Ludwig, K. (2007). The epistemology of thought experiments: First person versus third person approaches. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 31, 128–159.
- McMahan, J. (2000). Moral intuition. In H. LaFollette (Ed.), *Blackwell guide to ethical theory* (pp. 92–110). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nadelhoffer, T., & Feltz, A. (2008). The Actor-Observer bias and moral intuitions: Adding fuel to Sinnott-Armstrong's fire. *Neuroethics*, 1, 133–144.
- Nado, J. (2011). *Intuition and inquiry* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Rutgers University.
- Norcross, A. (1997). Comparing harms: Headaches and human lives. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 26, 135–167.
- Petrinovich, L., & O'Neill, P. (1996). Influence of wording and framing effects on moral intuitions. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 17, 145–171.
- Rachels, J. (1979). Killing and starving to death. *Philosophy*, 54, 159–171.
- Saulnier, K., & Perlman, D. (1981). The Actor-Observer bias is alive and well in prison: A sequel to Wells. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 7, 559–564.

- Schulz, E., Cokely, E., & Feltz, A. (2011). Persistent bias in expert judgments about free will and moral responsibility: A test of the expertise defense. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 20, 1722–1731.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2009). Do ethicists steal more books? *Philosophical Psychology*, 22, 711–725.
- Schwitzgebel, E., & Cushman, F. (2012). Expertise in moral reasoning? Order effects on moral judgment in professional philosophers and non-philosophers. *Mind and Language*, 27, 135–153.
- Schwitzgebel, E., & Rust, J. (2009). The moral behavior of ethicists: Peer opinion. *Mind*, 118, 1043–1059.
- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1, 229–243.
- Singer, P. (1974). Sidgwick and reflective equilibrium. *The Monist*, 58, 490–517.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2008). Framing moral intuitions. In W. Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral psychology: Vol. 2, The cognitive science of morality* (pp. 47–76). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smart, J.J.C., & Williams, B. (1973). *Utilitarianism: For and against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, J.J. (1985). The trolley problem. *Yale Law Journal*, 94, 1395–1415.
- Unger, P. (1996). *Living high and letting die*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weinberg, J., Gonnerman, C., Buckner, C., & Alexander, J. (2010). Are philosophers expert intuiters? *Philosophical Psychology*, 23, 331–355.
- Williamson, T. (2005). Armchair philosophy, metaphysical modality and counterfactual thinking. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105(1), 1–23.

Copyright of Philosophical Psychology is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.