

A CRITIQUE OF INTUITIONISM EXTRACT

“Another familiar objection to the appeal to moral intuitions is that they are often tainted by their origin. Earlier I quoted Singer as observing that many common intuitions have their ultimate source in primitive religious beliefs, ancient taboos about sex, and social practices that were useful in a world that is no longer ours.

There are many other tainted sources, such as superstitions concerning purity and defilement, and, perhaps most important, individual and collective self-interest. The vast majority of whites in the antebellum South thought it obvious that the enslavement of blacks was morally justified. Although they sought biblical and biological warrant for the practice, what really motivated their belief was crude self-interest. As long as they all had a strong interest in maintaining the practice and could reinforce each other’s beliefs by participating in the practice and raising their children to accept it as part of the natural background to their lives, they were able to insulate their intuitive sense of the rectitude of the institution of slavery from challenges that would otherwise have disturbed it.

People do the same today with their belief that it is permissible to kill animals in order to eat them. Because eating meat gives them pleasure, people assume that it is in their interest (though in the forms and quantities in which they consume it, it is not). Most people therefore eat meat and this itself shields them from critical reflection. For they assume that because virtually everyone does it, including the very nicest people they know, it simply cannot be seriously wrong to do it. Yet without the blinkering effects of self-interest, the many powerful moral objections to this practice would be obvious.”

Jeff McMahon, *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Second Edition. Edited by Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson 2013, page 116

Exercise: summarise the criticism of intuitionism discussed by Jeff McMahon