

# 4

## Reasons, Reflection, and Repugnance

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### 4.1 Introduction

In a widely cited article, ‘The Wisdom of Repugnance’ (1997), moral conservative Leon Kass claims that, ‘in crucial cases [...] repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s power fully to articulate it’ (1997, p. 20). He argues that ‘the burden of moral argument must fall entirely on those who want to declare the widespread repugnances of humankind to be mere timidity or superstition’ (1997, p. 21). Kass focuses on repugnance at human cloning and IVF but presumably he would generalize his view to a range of enhancement technologies. He believes that we are too readily ‘enchanted and enslaved by the glamour of technology’ (Kass 1997, p. 18) and that technology can undermine valuable aspects of our humanity.

In this chapter we draw comparisons between Kass’ views on the normative authority of repugnance and social intuitionist accounts of moral judgement which are similarly sceptical about the role of reasoned reflection in moral judgement. We survey the empirical claims made in support of giving moral primacy to intuitions generated by emotions such as repugnance, as well as some common objections. We then examine accounts which integrate intuition and reflection, and argue that plausible accounts of wisdom are in tension with Kass’ claim that our inarticulable emotional responses can be the expression of deep wisdom. We conclude that while repugnance and other emotions have a role to play in informing deliberation and judgement, we have reason to be cautious in giving them normative authority. Affective responses alone cannot discharge the burden of justification for moral judgement and are just one tool relied upon by those we consider wise.

### 4.2 Kass on Repugnance, Moral Judgement, and Wisdom

Kass wrote his article against human cloning in the aftermath of the first successful cloning of a mammal, Dolly the sheep. Despite the public opposition to human cloning,

then as now, he thought that an attempt at human cloning was imminent given a cultural trend to enthusiastically adopt new technology.<sup>1</sup> But even if that were the cultural trend, why should we be concerned about human cloning or any other technology?

Kass complains that certain technologies undermine valuable aspects of our natural humanity. For example, ‘cloning shows itself to be a major alteration, indeed, a major violation, of our given nature as embodied, gendered and engendered beings—and of the social relations built on this natural ground. . . . Asexual reproduction, which produces “single-parent” offspring, is a radical departure from the natural human way, confounding all normal understandings of father, mother, sibling, grandparent, etc., and all moral relations tied thereto’ (Kass 1997, pp. 20–1). According to Kass, the ‘natural human way’ is, roughly, that children should be raised by their biological parents who are in a stable monogamous relationship. For Kass, then, there is a fundamental natural humanity which we are morally obligated to protect in the face of technologies that would alienate us from that humanity. Therefore we need to judge which aspects of our humanity need to be protected from which technologies. We do so by feeling repugnance, which generates moral intuitions about the threats to our natural humanity.<sup>2</sup> Speaking of cloning, he says, ‘we are repelled . . . not because of the strangeness or novelty of the undertaking, but because we intuit or feel, *immediately and without argument*, the violation of things that we rightfully hold dear’ (Kass 1997, p. 20, emphasis added). It is worth noting that for moral repugnance to play this role, it presumably must have a different qualitative character to repugnance at the merely novel. A quantitative difference alone would be insufficient since even the extremely strange presumably falls short of moral wrongness; similarly something morally wrong may, unfortunately, become familiar.

At this point, one might wonder about the direction of explanation here (Giubilini 2015). Must we rely on repugnance to let us know what to hold dear—that is, what counts as our fundamental humanity—or do we define what we hold dear first and then rely on repugnance to alert us if it is threatened? Kass is ambiguous on this point. For the most part he appears to favour the former, affect-driven view, claiming that ‘repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, *beyond reason’s power fully to articulate it*’ (1997, p. 20, emphasis added). He also argues that the inability to find a justification for repugnance at incest, bestiality, cannibalism, rape, or murder in no way detracts from the normative authority of that repugnance, saying: ‘Would anyone’s failure to give full rational justification for his or her revulsion at these practices

<sup>1</sup> More specifically, he worries that the growing acceptance of single parenting will make human cloning attractive because clones are ‘the ultimate single-parent child’. He also thinks that the modern value that all children should be ‘wanted’, used to justify abortion and contraception, will be extended to justify cloning people that we ‘want’. As it happens, opposition to human cloning *has* decreased, from about 90 per cent to 80 per cent in the last 15 years (Gallup 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Kass is not completely clear on the relationship he envisages between repugnance and intuition. We interpret his view of repugnance as follows. Repugnance is an emotional response which gives rise to an intuitive, contentful judgement that the object of repugnance is morally wrong. The agent might try to justify the intuitions that stem from their repugnance with reflective thought but such justification is optional.

make that revulsion ethically suspect? Not at all' (Kass 1997, p. 20). In other words, we must rely on the normative authority of repugnance to generate intuitions about what we are morally obliged to resist and protect because we often cannot articulate why. Yet he also claims that, 'to pollution and perversion, the fitting response can only be horror and revulsion' (1997, p. 21). This appears to indicate that repugnance should 'fit' with a pre-established idea of what it is for natural humanity to be violated. In another context he mentions a case of repugnance being rightly overruled by reason: 'Surgery involves overcoming repugnance at violating wholeness and submitting to mutilation, overridden here only in order to defend the imperilled body against still greater threats to its integrity' (Kass 2002, p. 183). Kass might also be charitably interpreted as remaining somewhat open to consideration of counterargument when he states that 'the burden of moral argument must fall entirely on those who want to declare the widespread repugnances of humankind to be mere timidity or superstition' (1997, p. 21). There would be no point asking for argument from his opponents if his experience of repugnance was final.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Kass envisages a kind of mixed model where reason has some normative authority in certain cases (e.g. surgery) while in others repugnance has normative authority (e.g. human cloning). If this is his view he needs to explain how to distinguish the two kinds of case. How do we know when repugnance is wise?

An analysis of wisdom might help us at this point. Strangely, given the article's title, Kass leaves the notion of 'wisdom' completely unanalysed. However, his account resembles Jonathan Haidt's Social Intuitionism, which also gives moral intuition normative authority and may therefore draw on the empirical underpinnings of Haidt's view.

### 4.3 Affect-Based Accounts of Moral Judgement: Social Intuitionism

Haidt and colleagues (Haidt 2001, 2007, 2012; Haidt and Bjorkland 2008) have proposed that moral judgements are largely the result of moral intuition rather than moral reasoning. Moral intuitions are 'the sudden appearance in consciousness, of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good–bad, like–dislike) without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion' (Haidt 2001, p. 818). This account is supported by research that suggests that most, if not all, stimuli activate evaluative associations: an automatic attitude (positive or negative) that is immediate, unintentional, and preconscious (e.g. Fazio 2001). In some cases the evaluative tone of our automatic activations enters awareness in the form of a 'gut feeling'. For example, Haidt (2007, p. 998) notes that '[w]hen we think about sticking a pin into a child's hand... most of us have an automatic intuitive reaction that includes a flash of negative affect.' These automatic evaluative

<sup>3</sup> Though perhaps this request is a mere rhetorical flourish.

intuitions ground or constitute moral judgements which we may then go on to defend or disseminate using more cognitively demanding, slower explicit reasoning. Notably, moral reasoning usually occurs after the automatic production of the moral intuition, and the social intuitionist argues that such reasoning is usually ‘a post-hoc process in which we search for evidence to support our initial intuitive reaction’ (Haidt 2007, p. 998). This primacy of moral intuition over moral reasoning is allegedly revealed in ‘moral dumbfounding’ studies in which subjects are presented with harmless but disgusting or taboo-violating scenarios (Haidt and Hersh 2001). Because the negative ‘gut feeling’ about the act remains—for example, repugnance at the thought of consensual sibling incest—even when the reasons they have cited for condemning it are shown not to apply in the case at hand, subjects continue to insist that the act is morally wrong while acknowledging their inability to explain why.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this kind of evidence, Haidt claims that moral intuitions, rather than reason, cause moral judgements. Haidt (2012) sees reason as a tool to convince people to share one’s moral intuitions or form a consensus; consensus creates culturally relative moral truths.<sup>5</sup> Kass, in contrast, believes that his repugnance is alerting him to important and presumably timeless, objective moral truths. Nevertheless they agree in their rejection of reason as a moral guide in key cases, and Haidt appears to share Kass’ view that our affectively driven intuitions can be wise, arguing that we should look ‘for the roots of human intelligence, rationality, and virtue in what the mind does best: perception, intuition, and other mental operations that are quick, effortless, and generally quite accurate’ (Haidt 2001, pp. 821–2). Let us examine the case for intuition before turning to some problems of this approach.

#### 4.4 Wise Intuitions and Unwise Reflection

The folk readily acknowledge cases where acting in accordance with one’s emotions is best despite those emotions running counter to deliberative judgement. Nomy Arpaly illustrates one kind of case with Emily, who has always believed that she should pursue a PhD in chemistry. However, she finds that her studies are causing her to feel ‘restless, sad, and ill-motivated’ (Arpaly 2000, p. 504). Emily sees her feelings as ‘senseless and groundless’, yet they drive her to leave the programme. At the time of the decision she feels lazy and irrational but also greatly relieved. Only later does she come to understand that her feelings were caused by the fact that the programme was ill-suited to her talents, preferences, and character. In hindsight she ‘cites those feelings as the reasons for her quitting, and regards as irrationality not her quitting but that she held on to her conviction that the program was right for her for as long as she did’ (Arpaly 2000, p. 504). In a similar case but with a moral flavour, Huckleberry Finn judges it morally

<sup>4</sup> But see Kennett 2011, 2012 for an alternative interpretation of this finding. See also May 2014 for a sceptical view of the influence of disgust on moral judgement.

<sup>5</sup> Haidt endorsed cultural relativism in an interview with Tamla Sommers (2005).

wrong to help the slave, Jim, but continues to do so, motivated by feelings of compassion for him (Bennett 1974). When deliberating he can only find reasons in favour of handing Jim in and none in favour of helping him. Yet he continues to give in to his compassion. As external observers we might see Huck's compassion as the expression of moral reasons that should outweigh those provided by his ideologically clouded judgement. In each of these cases, 'outlaw' emotions appear to function as correctives to internally coherent but false frameworks that structure judgement (Jagger 1996).

How might we explain such cases? How does reflection go so wrong? Conscious, reflective thought is limited. Most obviously, it can be overwhelmed by multiple variables and/or time constraints (Lehrer 2009). Because of these limitations, in some circumstances, intuitive or unconscious cognitive processes can better guide decision-making. An experiment by Dijksterhuis and van Olden (2006), for example, showed that people who carefully reflected on a choice (between five artworks) were more likely to regret their decision than people who were distracted before making their decision. Unconscious thought processes were thought to be superior to conscious ones because,

first, the unconscious has very high capacity, leading unconscious thought to take into account all information rather than just a subset. Second, unconscious thought...weights the relative importance of different attributes of objects in a relatively objective and "natural" way... Conversely, conscious thought often disturbs this natural weighing process...and can therefore lead to inferior decisions. (Dijksterhuis and van Olden 2006, p. 628)

Similarly, in theories of expert action the focus is on the perceptual and recognitional elements of decision-making. Intuition is often both a faster and a more accurate way to make good decisions than relying on analysis and reflection (Hutton and Klein 1999; Dreyfus 2002; Bortolotti 2011).<sup>6</sup>

This range of evidence raises the possibility that intuitions generated by repugnance could guide wise choices even when they clash with deliberative frameworks that claim to ground good judgement. Repugnance might be the result of unconscious thought processes that integrate a wider range of information than the conscious thought processes of those who argue against that repugnance. Furthermore, attempts to justify repugnance (or a lack of it) may only result in causally irrelevant confabulations that unnecessarily and unhelpfully confound the real situation. However, the picture is more complicated than this evidence might suggest. We will first examine some objections to Kass that raise concerns about the reliability of intuitions, and then review the characteristics of expert decision-making that suggest the intuitions of the wise are not untrained intuitions. We will then turn to an important distinction made by Karen Jones between reason-tracking and reason-responding, before examining folk views of wisdom.

<sup>6</sup> Conscious, reflective thought is still best for some tasks and expert activities—for example, when bookmakers set odds.

#### 4.5 Problems for Kass: Unwise Intuitions

Kass' view faces at least three problems. The first objection targets his particular form of moral realism. The second and third raise doubts as to whether a moral realist can rely on moral intuitions to track moral truth and, therefore, whether intuitions can have normative authority:<sup>7</sup>

1. Kass assumes that he knows what the fundamental aspects of human nature are and that we are morally obliged to protect them. For example, he claims that human cloning is wrong because asexual reproduction is a radical departure from the natural human way and confounds all normal understandings of familial relationships and their moral relations. This raises two problems. First, his view of what is natural for human beings is highly questionable.<sup>8</sup> As Neil Levy points out in response to another moral conservative, Michael Sandel, '[H]omo sapiens is a niche constructing animal, an animal who shapes the environment that shapes it in turn. . . . We are deeply and essentially cultural animals. . . . because it is not just our social organisation, but our intrinsic capacities and traits that are shaped by our culture' (Levy 2009, p. 73). Our niche construction has resulted in our domesticating animals, living in cities, relying on supermarkets, and socializing on the Internet. These cultural and technological changes haven't destroyed our humanity—rather, they are an expression and a development of it. Drawing the line at cloning and other innovations that happen to elicit repugnance in moral conservatives seems arbitrary. There is no reason to think that society is unable to adapt to novel familial relations as the increasing acceptance of same-sex parenting and the evidence that children of such families are as likely to thrive as any others suggests (Crouch et al. 2014). Second, even if Kass was correct about what is natural for humans, he assumes that natural traits are good and worth protecting just because they are natural. However, many things are natural that are not obviously worth protecting (e.g. cancer), so facts about human nature cannot ground normative standards in any straightforward way.
2. Although Kass recognizes that mere novelty may elicit strong negative feelings, he does not explain how the agent can distinguish those cases, where they should discount their initial intuition, from those where they should take repugnance as a veridical moral signal—the expression of deep wisdom. He seems to assume that veridical moral repugnance will have a distinct, unmistakable qualitative character. Such a qualitative character seems unlikely; indeed, evidence from social psychology presented by Haidt and others (e.g. Doris 2006; Prinz 2006) to support their claims that emotion, not reason, is fundamental to

<sup>7</sup> If Haidt is committed to moral truth being relative to one's culture then he avoids these problems.

<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that this challenge to Kass' definition of moral truth holds whether he arrives at it by repugnance or reason.

moral judgement indicates that our affective responses, and so moral intuitions, can be influenced by morally irrelevant factors. For example, people make harsher moral judgements of people in vignettes if they read them at a filthy desk rather than at a clean desk (Schnall et al. 2008). In another case, participants who were hypnotized to feel disgust when they heard a morally neutral word would judge the behaviour of the protagonist more negatively when that neutral word appeared in the vignette (Wheatley and Haidt 2005). While the results of these experiments should be taken with caution (Jones 2006; Kennett and Fine 2009; Kennett 2012; May 2014) they should concern Kass. If disgust caused by morally irrelevant factors can pollute our moral judgement then its claim to be, or to ground, wisdom is undermined. Disgust does not reliably specify moral targets.

3. Kass seems to accept that some repugnance is misplaced (the merely novel or strange), some repugnance tracks the moral but can be dismissed with good reason (surgery), and some repugnance grounds morality in and of itself (human cloning). But different people make these distinctions in different places: that which elicits a fundamental moral repugnance for one person seems arguable, merely strange, or even familiar to other people.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the things people find repugnant change over time. What was once strange becomes familiar. If there is no reason to favour one person's intuitions over those of another then we cannot know whose intuitions are right: repugnance lacks normative authority. Indeed, even moral conservative intuitions have changed over time. For example, conservatives found women who fought for suffrage repellent and unnatural, and their repugnance was widely shared. Viscount Helmsley, speaking in the House of Commons, said:

It seems to me that this House should remember that if the vote is given to women those who will take the greatest part in politics will not be the quiet, retiring, constitutional women...but those very militant women who have brought so much disgrace and discredit upon their sex... One feels that it is not cricket for women to use force... It is little short of nauseating and disgusting to the whole sex. (Hansard Archive 1912)

It is unlikely that latter-day conservatives would regard female suffrage as a departure from human nature or the suffragette's actions as nauseating, however much they might still disapprove of property damage. It is hard to resist the conclusion that much of what conservatives opposed and felt repugnance towards in the past was on account of its strangeness, or its challenge to conservative, white, male privilege, rather than its responsiveness to deep truths about our shared humanity. Perhaps we could settle on the targets that are genuinely repugnant by appealing to the repugnances of the majority, but majority intuitions have clearly been misplaced in the past (e.g. repugnance at

<sup>9</sup> For example, on the basis of his disgust at it, Kass considers licking ice cream in public unacceptable (Kass 1994, p. 148).

interracial marriage). In any case, it is hard to imagine that Kass would be happy to correct his moral judgement on the grounds that the majority didn't share his repugnance. The case of same-sex marriage, for example, is one where conservatives such as Kass currently find themselves in a minority in many societies. Presumably he would see disagreement here as a sign that the majority have lost their moral compass. Therefore Kass needs an argument for why we should believe that *his* repugnances track moral truth; he cannot pass the burden of moral argument to his opponents as he hopes. If the moral judgements that stem from repugnance ultimately require justification, then we have abandoned Kass' view in favour of a more rationalist and deliberative view of moral judgement.

Kass might hope to respond to these objections by appealing to the notion of expertise; repugnance *per se* does not have moral authority but perhaps the repugnance of moral experts does. The problem for Kass is that research on expert decision-making reveals an important role for slower reflective cognition in the acquisition and deployment of expertise. According to Hutton and Klein, the characteristics of expert decision-making are summarized as:

(1) Expertise is domain-specific; (2) experts are better able to perceive patterns; (3) experts are relatively fast and virtually error-free; (4) experts have superior memory in their domain of expertise, (although this is often dependent on external cues); (5) experts have a deeper understanding of the problem to solve (e.g. they catch on the causal mechanisms), whereas novices are distracted by superficial features of the problem; (6) experts have a better understanding of their own limitations and an ability to catch themselves when they commit errors; (7) through years of experience, experts acquire the ability to perceive relevant features of the situation (distinguish typical features from exceptions, make fine discriminations, antecedents, and consequences). (Hutton and Klein 1999)

While features (2)–(4) might be automatic, prereflective processes, it is apparent that they are reflectively trained processes rather than completely intuitive ones, and features (5)–(7) require developed reflective abilities, including the ability to conceive of consequences and imagine alternatives.<sup>10</sup> In the moral domain, a deep understanding of a problem would seem to involve the capacity to articulate it and provide a justification for one's response. Consider again the case of Emily. She ultimately concludes that her feelings were a better indicator of what she should do than was her explicit reasoned judgement. It was only much later when Emily achieved a deeper understanding of her ill-suitedness to study—an understanding she could then articulate—that she approached wisdom. For, as the case of the shifting line of moral repugnance towards technological and social change suggests, our feelings, on their own, don't have normative authority. One can easily imagine an alternative ending to Emily's

<sup>10</sup> With regard to (1), Kass could argue that repugnance-based moral expertise is a domain-specific skill or, unlike typical expertise, a relatively domain-general skill. There are issues with both characterizations but we won't pursue them here, given that all expertise involves reflective thought and so doesn't support Kass' view.



story (also amply demonstrated in everyday experience) where she later realizes that her restlessness and lack of motivation in her studies were caused by her internalization of unfortunate gender stereotypes that she now rejects, or by her unacknowledged fears that a successful scientific career would damage her relationship with her mother. She now regrets her earlier decision to quit. In both versions, however, the phenomenology of her coming to quit is exactly the same and it is hard to see why in one case but not the other we should regard the decision as rational or wise *when it was made*. Retrospective endorsement of a decision made on the basis of an intuition is not sufficient.

Nevertheless, we should be cautious about discounting or overriding our intuitions, since, as Karen Jones (2003) argues, they can be reason-tracking. What is needed is a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between intuitive and reflective cognition, and how both contribute to rational action. We turn now to Jones.

#### 4.6 Reason-Tracking vs. Reason-Responding

Jones begins with the relatively uncontroversial claim that, ‘as practical agents, we are trying to latch onto those considerations that really are reason-giving for us in a situation’ (Jones 2003, p. 184). The conflict between Kass and those of a more rationalist persuasion is over which mechanisms and methods are best suited to latch on to those reasons—*affect and intuition or reflective thought*. Based on the range of evidence already considered, it seems that both are essential and each is superior in certain situations. Presumably a wise person would be especially good at knowing when to rely on each. How might this be achieved?

Jones begins to answer this question by making a distinction between reason-trackers and reason-responders. Reason-trackers are capable of ‘behaving in accordance with [reasons], but . . . need possess neither the concept of a reason nor have a self-conception’ (Jones 2003, p. 190). A variety of animals count as reason-trackers since innate capacities and learned associations are sufficient to track reasons most of the time. For example, a shark’s instincts successfully key it in to what it has most reason to do most of the time, such as what to hunt and when to do it.<sup>11</sup> It is apparent that reason-tracking on its own is not sufficient for wisdom. Sharks may be effective reason-trackers in their domain but they would not, for example, satisfy the conditions for expertise, even within that restricted domain. For that we must also be reason-responders. Reason-responders are sophisticated reason-trackers ‘capable of tracking reasons in virtue of responding to them as reasons’ (Jones 2003, p. 190). Responding to reasons *as reasons* requires complex reflective capacities in order to see certain reasons as *justifying* one action over alternative actions that may also have something to be said for them. To justify an action, a reason-responder has to be able to step back from their immediate affective responses and question whether they direct us to anything choice-worthy.

<sup>11</sup> Is Jones’ definition of ‘reason’ too broad? Perhaps only reason-responders really have reasons, and beings that are mere reason-trackers do not. This definitional change would not affect our argument.

The advantage of being a reason-responder is that one can track reasons more robustly. ‘A creature who lacks critical reflective capacities will not be able to display the same kind of flexibility in its action and sensitivity to the implications of changes in its environment that a reason-responder can’ (Jones 2003, p. 90). A shark, for example, will consistently take bait on hooks, unable to recalibrate its reason-tracking mechanisms to distinguish bait from real prey. Most adult humans are reason-responders, which allows them to track their reasons despite living in a highly dynamic sociopolitical world, where reason-tracking strategies need to be regularly revised or replaced. So, for example, one might avoid blood and viscera because one finds it disgusting. Disgust is reason-tracking because it evolved to help us avoid contaminants and disease (Oaten, Stevenson, and Case 2009; Curtis, De Barra, and Aunger 2011). Yet there are specific environments where humans need to overcome that disgust, which lies at the base of repugnance. Trainee surgeons, for example, have to use reflective thought to discount feelings of disgust in order to do what they have more reason to do—save lives and pursue careers. Reason-responders can adjust their behaviour in response to changing circumstances. Intuitive processes are not limited to tracking the reasons they evolved to track, however. They have the potential to reason-track in a range of novel environments but, to do so, they depend on monitoring and recalibration by reflective thought (Jones 2003, p. 196). So, at first, the trainee surgeon needs to try to discount their disgust at each surgical procedure but, over time, their disgust mechanisms adapt so that they are no longer disgusted by surgery.

Despite our self-monitoring efforts we still occasionally find ourselves in situations like that of Emily, wrestling with whether to continue her PhD. Our intuitions conflict with our reflective cognition and we are unsure which is more likely to track our reasons for action. It is tough to know what our reasons are at the time of such conflicts because we have to make do with the self-knowledge our self-monitoring systems have afforded us to date. Such experiences provide opportunities to improve our self-monitoring techniques and self-knowledge so that the next time we face that kind of situation we may better interpret our affective states and question our reasoning more closely.

From Jones’ view, then, the rational agent will prefer intuition over reflection when reflective thought is expected to poorly track reasons and/or when intuitions have been trained and so are expected to track reasons accurately. Likewise the rational agent will tend to rely on reason in cases where intuitions aren’t suited to the task or where intuitions haven’t yet been well trained. The capacity to make such a judgement improves as one’s self-knowledge increases, a self-knowledge that depends on the accumulated experience of self-monitoring both one’s affective states and one’s reflective reasoning. It’s worth noting that there is a clear sense in which reflective thought has the ultimate normative authority. Whether one uses reflective thought or intuition at the time of decision, self-monitoring requires reflective thought to assess decisions in hindsight and implement changes for the future. It seems plausible to claim that wise people cannot just be reason-trackers; they must be reason-responders. This

allows them to track reasons despite changes in their environment, their bodies, and their cognitive architecture.

Before considering the implications of Jones' account for Kass, we will say something more about the characteristics of those we consider wise that would allow us to better assess the claim that repugnance can be the expression of deep wisdom. Valerie Tiberius and Jason Swartwood (2011) use the method of wide reflective equilibrium to develop a theory of wisdom that makes no assumptions regarding the truth of any particular moral theory or theory of value. Of particular interest are their conclusions about the epistemic policies that characterize the wise.

#### 4.7 Wisdom: a Closer Analysis

Tiberius and Swartwood developed their view by examining a range of psychological research on folk intuitions about wisdom.<sup>12</sup> The resulting folk theory was then calibrated against theoretical desiderata and research on human cognitive capacities with the goal of arriving at a rationally compelling and psychologically realistic theory of what wisdom consists of. To discover the folk conception of wisdom they conducted a literature review of personal experience and descriptor-rating studies in the psychology literature. In these studies, participants identify and describe wise people and wise acts, or they rate how related and central various characteristics are to wisdom and wise people. The analysis of this literature indicates that there are four key components to the folk concept of wisdom: deep understanding, reflective capacities, problem-solving capacities, and motivation to live well and help others live well.

Wise people have a *deep understanding* of the practical challenges people face, the values that different people hold and how values can change, the ways values impact on practical concerns, and the emotional and intellectual challenges involved in practical success. This includes knowledge of oneself and others (motivations, emotions, habits, skills, limitations, and values), and general knowledge about the physically possible and what can count as a meaningful life. Wise people know 'what matters and can make appropriate distinctions and connections between the various things that matter in life' (Tiberius and Swartwood 2011, p. 282).

*Reflective capacities* help the wise person develop deep understanding. Wise people assimilate information from diverse sources (personal experience, reflection, and advice from others) and can reorganize old information in new ways. They can apply abstract characterizations of problems to particular states of affairs. Reflective capacities help the wise person 'come to a comprehensive, thoughtful and accurate understanding of the nature of life's challenges and choices' (Tiberius & Swartwood 2011, p. 282).

<sup>12</sup> We focus on the research outlined by Tiberius and Swartwood because we wish to provide an empirically based account of what is required for wisdom in response to Kass' claims—especially insofar as he bases these claims on allegedly shared responses. The theory that emerges from the examination of the empirical literature does chime with much philosophical discussion of wisdom. See, for example, Nozick 1989 and Ryan 1999.

Wise people have good *problem-solving capacities* where they bring their deep understanding to bear on practical problems while remaining mindful of the values at stake (their own and those of others). Practical success requires understanding and responding appropriately to both others' emotions and one's own.

Finally, wise people are kind and helpful; they are motivated to choose well and to help others choose well.

Importantly, the folk take both deep understanding and reflective capacities to be dynamic:

A wise person is one who guides her actions by her values but also refines and reassesses her values as needed. . . . Most studies emphasise that wise people can take the long-term view of the relationship between their actions, values and priorities, can be self-critical and admit mistakes, and are open to new information that may lead them to change their values. (Tiberius and Swartwood 2011, p. 282)

In other words, understanding can always be made deeper and reflective capacities can always be improved. This is because the world is constantly making new information available and our innate cognitive limitations can be mitigated. The folk therefore see wise people as good reason-responders; wise people self-monitor, train their reflective thought, and build self-understanding. Significantly, the folk also see wisdom as being inherently intersubjective. Wise people learn from others and they are motivated to help other people.

Reflecting on the folk conception of wisdom, Tiberius and Swartwood argue that people need at least three policies to develop and maintain wisdom: policies of *justification, epistemic humility and open-mindedness*. These complementary policies can be seen as an elaboration of Jones' view. The wise person creates justificatory stories for how they have chosen to prioritize different values (from multiple perspectives) and distinguish genuine values from things that falsely appear valuable. Justifications can be challenged, developed and taught.<sup>13</sup> By providing justificatory stories, then, the agent opens their decision-making process up to critical help from others. When providing advice, they also give the advisee some basis for discriminating good advice from bad. Epistemic humility is essential once we recognize our epistemic limitations and cognitive biases (biases that influence justificatory reasoning even in quiet moments). If our reasoning can be flawed without our realizing it then we should be prepared to revise our beliefs in the light of new information. Open-mindedness is a good way to access new and potentially challenging information. The wise agent won't automatically revise their beliefs in the face of contrary views, of course, because others also suffer from cognitive limitations. Contrary views signal the need to revisit and compare justificatory stories to see which beliefs and decisions are justified.

<sup>13</sup> Tiberius and Swartwood are alert to the fact that the agent cannot try to justify everything all the time. Rather, reflection can be undertaken in calm, cool moments and then form the basis for more automatic non-reflective decisions when required.

Tiberius and Swartwood claim the view of wisdom they offer is one that people have good reason to aspire to upon reflection, and that they can use to regulate and guide their attempts to develop wisdom and make wise choices (2011, p. 289). By grounding their theory in part in folk views of wisdom they claim to offer ‘an ideal that is to some extent already ours’ but one which has been refined to take account of our cognitive limitations. It is, they claim, both empirically informed and reflectively sound.

#### 4.8 Wisdom and Repugnance Reconsidered

The view of wisdom gleaned from Jones, and from Tiberius and Swartwood, has significant implications for Kass’ claims about the normative authority of deep repugnance.

First, Jones’ analysis places clear restrictions on the role repugnance can play in latching on to considerations that count as reasons. To the extent that Kass isolates repugnance from being regulated by reflection or answerable to demands for justification, repugnance will fail to adjust to changes in the environment (or changes in the agent) that might throw it off. We may no longer have reason to avoid some things that innately elicit repugnance, and perhaps we should develop repugnance at things that don’t innately elicit it. Repugnance might be reason-tracking in the moral domain, even when it conflicts with reflective thought, but *only* if it has been properly trained by reflective thought (and those reflective capacities themselves have been reflectively trained). Even then we should be cautious in deferring too readily to repugnance responses. The reason for this is that we should expect disgust to produce a lot of false positives—in evolutionary terms we are better safe than sorry when it comes to bad food and communicable disease. Indeed, the evolutionary history of disgust suggests that repugnance may be a particularly *unreliable* guide in social and moral contexts where the fear of contamination too readily attaches to designated out-groups (Kelly 2011). The data on implicit bias should worry us here. For most of us, culturally embedded unconscious associations between, for example, black skin and aggression, or homosexuality and contamination, produce negative affective responses of fear or disgust that drive judgements (particularly when we are tired or distracted) that we would, and should, reject upon reflection, even if we cannot entirely remove the affective responses themselves (Phelps et al. 2000; Dasgupta et al. 2009). On this story the appearance of repugnance should always prompt further reflection to determine whether it is reason-tracking or reason-distracting. The spotted history of moral repugnance does not support the view that even widespread repugnances are likely to be the expression of deep wisdom. Repugnance seems too unreliable to be a feature or expression of wisdom.

Second, the *policies* of the wise identified by Tiberius and Swartwood seem to conflict with the claim that we should trust repugnance, or that the burden of argument must lie with those who do not share Kass’ intuitions. A policy of epistemic

humility would encourage the agent to remain open to the possibility that their repugnance was unfounded.<sup>14</sup> Open-mindedness encourages them to consider the views of others who do not share their feelings of repugnance. Finally, the policy of justification requires that any repugnance (or lack thereof) be justified; it cannot settle an argument on its own. Kass might argue that this conception of wisdom is mistaken. Unfortunately he does not offer an alternative account.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Kass cannot rely on widely shared repugnance to make his argument while rejecting the evidence for a widely shared view of wisdom that tends to undermine his claims about the wisdom of repugnance. There would need to be a good reason to convince the folk that they have a distorted view of wisdom, and that the attributes and policies of the wise should normatively defer to the deep repugnances of moral conservatives.

## 4.9 Conclusion

Kass (1997) claims moral repugnance can alert us to threats against our fundamental human nature. However, his attempt to define and protect a static human nature is wrong-headed because the evidence supports the view that we are cultural animals whose intrinsic capacities and traits are continually shaped by our culture. Moreover, moral judgements generated by repugnance cannot be trusted to reliably track the moral truth because they are too readily influenced by morally irrelevant factors, and even the repugnances of moral conservatives have changed over time. This all suggests that moral repugnance elicited by new technologies is merely a response to the unfamiliar; at the very least, Kass owes us an argument for why it is not.

Wisdom research suggests that the wise, like other experts, will rely on intuitions over reflective thought but only when those intuitions have been developed through reflection, training, and experience and are subject to reflective oversight. Therefore the normative authority of intuitions is parasitic on long-term reflective training. Repugnance is only one of many ways intuitions are generated and so, even when well trained, repugnance would only be expected to play a minor role in an account of wisdom. More central to wisdom are the policies of epistemic humility, open-mindedness, and a willingness to justify one's actions. These policies allow the wise agent to train both their affective responses and their reflective thinking to track their reasons more robustly. Such self-monitoring is essential because both the world and the agent are constantly changing so that prior training is always going out of date.

<sup>14</sup> Epistemic humility may be consistent with challenging one's opponent to provide reasons why repugnance is not to be trusted, but it seems inconsistent with the claim that those who do not share one's repugnances bear the *entire* burden of proof. Humility would seem to require an acknowledgement that the request for reasons is also one that can legitimately be made of moral conservatives.

<sup>15</sup> We do not deny that some such account might be available, but we do not see it as our task to supply him with an account.

This view of wisdom suggests that we should not rely on our starting intuitions to cast final judgements on novel technologies, including those that promise to enhance human capacities; the very novelty of those technologies entails that our intuitions will not be specifically trained to respond to them (Singer 2005). Wise decisions about how a new technology should be shaped and regulated requires reflective thought and intersubjective reasoning, and, like Emily, we often require more time and experience before we have sufficient knowledge to make our final judgement. In these cases, repugnance may alert us to the need to proceed with caution but it does not have the normative authority to end the conversation.

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