

# Against Reflective Equilibrium (or, What is ethics for?)

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Imagine you were an early settler of what is now the United States. It seems likely you would have killed native Americans. After all, your parents killed them, your siblings killed them, your friends killed them, the leaders of the community killed them, the President killed them. Chances are, you would have killed them too, and you probably wouldn't have seen anything wrong with this.

Indeed, it probably wouldn't even have occurred to you to think about the morality of this. If you did, it would probably seem just. They were trying to kill *you*! And your family! Going after them was just self-defense! (It wasn't, of course; you invaded *their* land.)

Or if you see nothing wrong with killing native Americans, take the example of slavery. Again, everyone had slaves and probably didn't think too much about the morality of it. That was just the way the world was. If you were asked about the big moral questions you faced, you'd probably think of things like the proper time to pay back a loan, or lying to your wife, or maybe a child's duty of obedience to their father.

Today, looking back on people who murder native American and keep slaves, those seem like comparatively small potatoes. Sure, we justify it by saying that they were just people of their time, but still... It's hard to get over the fact that George Washington ordered his general to "lay waste all the settlements around...that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed." (He also ordered that they not "listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected. Our future security will be in...the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them.") It somehow colors everything he says. Whatever he may have thought about loan repayment or lying, slavery was the big moral question of his time, and (in practice, at least) he got it wrong.

We don't kill native Americans much these days and we don't keep slaves, but it's hard to believe that our era must be morally perfect. Surely if people back then could make such huge moral blunders, we could be making similar ones right now. And ethical philosophy is useless if it can't help us avoid such huge mistakes.

Some people suggest that the way to do ethical philosophy is to listen to our intuitions. "I do not think our intuitions about cases are less reliable than those about principles," Frances Kamm argues.

But *of course* our intuitions about cases are less reliable! If we could simply trust our intuitions, we wouldn't need ethical philosophy at all. If something was wrong, we would just know it was wrong. There would be nothing philosophy could tell us.

Obviously this is absurd. Lots of people do things that seem clearly unethical while thinking they're in the right. Perhaps Kamm thinks these mistakes are merely the result of temporary passions and that from her desk at Harvard she can consider such question with a more objective eye.

But, as I have shown, people's intuitions about cases are *systematically* distorted. Sitting at a desk wasn't enough to persuade George Washington to stop killing native Americans. His mistake wasn't the result of some momentary passion, but of an entire culture that had normalized mass murder and a society that depended on it. To think that he would just suddenly sit down and go "Hmm, murdering Indians feels wrong to me" is ridiculous. The only way he would possibly conclude that is by taking seriously his *principles*.

I grew up eating animals. I saw nothing wrong with this. My parents ate them, my siblings ate them, my friends ate them, people on TV ate them, the President ate them. I doubt I stopped to think about the morality of eating animals any more than I stopped to think about the morality of brushing my teeth. If you asked me for my intuition, I would have said eating animals was just fine. It was only when I stopped eating animals that my intuitions began to change.