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SOME GOOD AND BAD NEWS FOR ETHICAL INTUITIONISM

BY PEKKA VÄYRYNEN

The core doctrine of ethical intuitionism is that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. Against this, Sturgeon has recently objected that if ethical intuitionists accept a certain plausible rationale for the autonomy of ethics, then their foundationalism commits them to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. I show that irrespective of whether ethical intuitionists take non-inferential ethical knowledge to be a priori or a posteriori, their commitment to the autonomy of ethics and foundationalism does not entail any implausible non-inferential knowledge in areas outside ethics (such as the past, the future, or the unobservable). However, each form of intuitionism does require a controversial stand on certain unresolved issues outside ethics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The core doctrine of ethical intuitionism is that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. This epistemological doctrine does not entail certain philosophical excesses which critics have often attributed to intuitionism, such as that we have some dedicated faculty of ethical intuition, or that beliefs based on ethical intuition are infallible or self-guaranteeing.¹ Nor does it require various other positions which have often been often associated with the intuitionist tradition in moral philosophy, for instance, a non-naturalist metaphysics of ethical facts and properties or irreducible pluralism in axiology and normative ethics. Although much still remains to be done in defence of ethical intuitionism, it has of late been getting a worse reputation than it deserves. This paper focuses on the recent objection that intuitionism implies an implausible epistemology *outside* ethics. The good news is that the objection in question fails to establish this. The bad news is that whether ethical intuitionism implies a plausible epistemology *within* ethics depends on how certain outstanding issues in other areas of philosophy are resolved.

¹ In what follows I shall largely jettison the word 'intuition'; different writers use the word in quite different ways. Besides, from W.D. Ross onwards, many ethical intuitionists themselves have preferred to avoid using 'intuition' in expounding their theory because the word can be misleading.

II. THE STANDARD ARGUMENT FOR ETHICAL INTUITIONISM

According to ethical intuitionism, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. Speaking roughly, inferential knowledge is knowledge based on reasonable inference from other things one knows. The nature of this ‘based on’ relation is a complicated matter, but at minimum it marks some kind of positive dependence of a belief’s status as knowledge on the factors from which the belief derives its status as knowledge.² In the case of inferential knowledge, these factors may be other propositions which one knows or other beliefs one has (or has ‘available’) which count as knowledge. Knowledge that p may then be a case of inferential knowledge even if the psychological process that produced the belief was not an actual inference, so long as the belief’s status as knowledge positively depends on whether it is reasonably inferable from other things one knows. (How to understand this idea depends on how generously one understands the notion of inference. For example, would the reasonable inferences have to be explicit if they were drawn, or could they be implicit?)

Accordingly, still speaking roughly, non-inferential knowledge is knowledge which need not be based on reasonable inference from other supporting propositions or beliefs which count as knowledge. Of course, one might know some supporting propositions all the same. If p can be known non-inferentially, it does not follow that p cannot also be known inferentially. The phrase ‘non-inferential knowledge’ raises two complications. First, if there are ways other than reasonable inference for knowledge that p to be based on other propositions or beliefs which count as knowledge, then in those cases we can say that knowledge that p is ‘mediated’ by them if it comes, at least in part, from one’s knowledge of other propositions, and ‘immediate’ otherwise.³ In this terminology, ethical intuitionism says that we have some ethical knowledge which does not come even in part from other supporting propositions which one knows, or from the fact that one knows them. In what follows, however, I shall stick to the terms ‘inferential’ and ‘non-inferential’ even though the terms ‘mediate’ and ‘immediate’ might on occasion be more apt. Secondly, analogous rough characterizations can be given of the notions of inferential and non-inferential, and mediate and immediate, epistemic justification. In what follows, however, I shall often

² For a distinction between positive and negative epistemic dependence, see, e.g., R. Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 144.

³ For this terminology, see J. Pryor, ‘Is There Immediate Justification?’, in M. Steup and E. Sosa (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 181–202, at p. 183.

simplify by talking about knowledge even when it would be more apt to talk about epistemic justification. To make things more precise, I shall take ethical intuitionism to require that ethical knowledge can be based by some non-inferential mechanism on some kind of reasons or evidence, where such non-doxastic states as experiences and phenomenal and intellectual appearances of various sorts are typically taken to be capable of presenting the relevant kind of reasons or evidence.

One reason to understand along these lines the core thesis of intuitionism, that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential, is that then intuitionism purports to solve the sceptical regress problem for ethical knowledge.⁴ For if one knows that p non-inferentially, then there is no further proposition which one must know in order to know that p . This would stop the regress.

Another reason to understand ethical intuitionism in this way is that it reflects an argument which has influenced most intuitionists and their critics alike. Understanding inferential and non-inferential knowledge as above, I can present this 'standard argument' for intuitionism as follows:

- S1. If we have any ethical knowledge, then it is either (a) non-inferential, or (b) based on reasonable inference from partly ethical premises, or (c) based on reasonable inference from entirely non-ethical premises
- S2. *The autonomy of ethics*: there is no reasonable inference (deductive or non-deductive) to any ethical conclusion from entirely non-ethical premises
- S3. Therefore if we have any ethical knowledge, it is either (a) non-inferential or (b) based on reasonable inference from partly ethical premises
- S4. *Foundationalism*: if we have any knowledge (*a fortiori*, any ethical knowledge) which is inferential, then all such knowledge is ultimately based on reasonable inference from some knowledge which is non-inferential
- S5. Therefore if we have any ethical knowledge, then some of it is non-inferential
- S6. *Ethical non-scepticism*: we have some ethical knowledge
- S7. Therefore some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential.⁵

(S1) is a reasonable general assumption. (S2) entails that not all of our ethical knowledge falls under clause (c) in (S1). So (S1) and (S2) jointly entail (S3). (S4), which strictly speaking does not exhaust foundationalism but only states a salient part of it, entails that not all of our ethical knowledge falls under clause (b) in (S1). So (S3) and (S4) jointly entail (S5). Finally, (S5) and

⁴ The regress argument comes in many versions, but the differences between them matter little to my present purposes. See, e.g., Pryor, 'Is There Immediate Justification?', p. 184.

⁵ This makes more explicit the argument as presented in N. Sturgeon, 'Ethical Intuitionism and Ethical Naturalism', in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 184–211, at pp. 190–1. See also R. Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 72.

(S6) jointly entail the core thesis of intuitionism in (S7). So the standard argument is valid.

According to the standard argument, if we combine foundationalism with the autonomy of ethics, then we face a choice between scepticism and intuitionism about ethics. We must also realize that the standard argument is valid independently of the fact that it concerns ethics. A parallel argument concerning the future or the unobservable would be equally valid. The argument therefore seems to generalize: combining foundationalism with the autonomy of our thought about a given topic forces a choice between intuitionism and scepticism about the topic in question.⁶

Since the standard argument is valid, any critic of ethical intuitionism must reject at least one of its premises. Only sceptics about ethical knowledge reject (S6). This is a move I shall not explore in this paper. Given that (S1) is a reasonable assumption, any non-sceptical critic of intuitionism must therefore reject either (S2) or (S4). But for my present purposes I shall simply set aside the familiar ‘cheap’ counter-examples and assume that (S2), the autonomy of ethics, is true. My concern in this paper is the objection to ethical intuitionism which challenges foundationalism.

III. INTUITIONISM AND THE AUTONOMY OF ETHICS

The objection in question, due to Nicholas Sturgeon, is that we must reject ethical intuitionism because, given a certain plausible general rationale for the autonomy of ethics, its commitment to foundationalism leads intuitionism to an implausible epistemology outside ethics.

Sturgeon offers a naturalistic ‘rationale’ for the autonomy of ethics. He notes (p. 201) that ‘our thought about the natural world is highly populated by areas that are autonomous with respect to the evidence we bring to bear on them’. We cannot reasonably infer, for instance, any conclusion about unobservables from premises which are entirely about observables, or any conclusion about psychological states solely from observations of behaviour. This is because assessments of evidence for theoretical conclusions are ‘theory-dependent’. In deciding what to think, for instance, about a conclusion concerning unobservables in the light of some observed facts, we typically find ourselves having to rely not just on our understanding of the observed facts and the conclusion but also on a body of auxiliary assumptions, which will inevitably include some theoretical assumptions and some of which will concern unobservables. The autonomy of many areas of our thought about the natural world is plausibly explained by how this kind of

⁶ This point is due to Sturgeon, pp. 197, 202.

theory-dependence pervades our reasoning in those areas. It is then plausible that the explanation for the autonomy of ethics is probably the same. Ethical intuitionists should agree, Sturgeon says (*ibid.*), unless they can give a good reason to think that the autonomy of ethics requires an exceptional explanation.

Sturgeon then argues that this naturalistic rationale for the autonomy of ethics is available to intuitionists only at a high epistemological cost. The rationale commits us to the autonomy of our thought about the past, the future, the unobservable, the psychological, and many other topics. As I have pointed out, combining foundationalism with the autonomy of our thought about a given topic forces a choice between intuitionism and scepticism about the topic in question. So unless ethical intuitionists who accept Sturgeon's rationale for the autonomy of ethics are sceptics about such topics as the past, the future, the unobservable, and the psychological, they must be intuitionists about these too. This commitment would be a cost because it is 'not very plausible' (Sturgeon, p. 202). It is doubtful that we have non-inferential knowledge about the future or the unobservable, let alone that we have enough to provide the needed basis for all the rest that we know in these areas, contrary to foundationalism. So if ethical intuitionists accept the autonomy of ethics on the basis of Sturgeon's rationale, then combining it with foundationalism commits them to an implausible overall epistemology.⁷ But to give up foundationalism would be to give up ethical intuitionism.

In short, Sturgeon's main objection to the intuitionist view that some ethical beliefs constitute knowledge independently of whether one can reasonably infer them from other things one knows is that it implies an implausible epistemology outside ethics. The objection is already powerful, but it can perhaps be made stronger still by considering what beliefs count as inferentially acquired in the first place. We can distinguish between narrower and broader notions of inference. One fairly narrow notion is that a belief counts as being based on inference only if it is consciously drawn from premises that are explicitly noted as evidence.⁸ One fairly broad notion

⁷ More precisely, Sturgeon (p. 204) argues that ethical intuitionism is committed to either an implausible non-naturalist metaphysics within ethics or an implausible epistemology outside it. I do not need to deal with this complication, since I focus on the epistemological aspect of the argument. Some ethical intuitionists claim that an intuitionist moral epistemology is not committed to a non-naturalist metaphysics. See R. Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (eds), *Moral Knowledge?* (Oxford UP, 1996), pp. 101–36, and *The Good in the Right* (Princeton UP, 2004), pp. 55, 232 n. 47. Indeed, ethical intuitionism seems quite compatible with definitions of ethical naturalism like, for instance, the one given in D. Copp, 'Why Naturalism?', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 6 (2003), pp. 179–200.

⁸ See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 45.

applies 'to cases in which someone is unable to articulate the premises, and also to cases in which someone is unconscious of making an inference and perhaps even of accepting the premises' (Sturgeon, p. 209).

Those who endorse the autonomy of ethics tend to apply the doctrine in a way that deploys some relatively broad notion of inference.⁹ For example, when people seem to move from purely non-ethical premises directly to an ethical conclusion, anyone who thinks 'What terrible reasoning!' tends to think this only when unable to interpret them as having in some or other way relied on some ethical assumptions. It seems plausible to suppose that those who make such an inference must in fact be relying on, or have been influenced by, further ethical assumptions.

To the extent that ethical intuitionists apply the autonomy of ethics in this familiar manner, they are already committed to some relatively broad notion of a belief's being based on inference. If so, then the validity of the standard argument for intuitionism requires us to interpret foundationalism in terms of a correspondingly broad notion of inference. On such a notion, however, it seems quite plausible that those ethical beliefs which intuitionists would want to count as non-inferential knowledge count as products of inference in a broad sense in which a piece of reasoning might be unconscious or else not fully articulable. Analogously, it seems implausible that a psychologically immediate theoretical belief like 'There goes a proton', which a scientist might form upon observing a vapour trail in a cloud chamber, could ever count as non-inferential knowledge.¹⁰ This point recruits considerations of how ethical intuitionists tend to apply the autonomy of ethics in the service of putting further pressure on foundationalism.

More would need to be said to assess fully this addendum to Sturgeon's main objection to ethical intuitionism. For instance, he grants (p. 209) that any broad notion of a belief's being based on inference needs ultimately to be justified on the basis of its role in a plausible epistemology, and not merely by the above sort of dialectical considerations. We would need to determine just how broad a notion of inference is required for applying the autonomy of ethics in the familiar manner. We might think twice if it turned out that the notion counted, for instance, ordinary perceptual beliefs as inferentially acquired if they are so much as acquired within a framework of

⁹ This paragraph canvasses the fuller discussion in Sturgeon, pp. 210–11.

¹⁰ Sturgeon (pp. 202–3) cites epistemological similarities between physical and ethical 'intuitions' to support his claim about the ethical case. In this he follows R. Boyd, 'How to Be a Moral Realist', in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell UP, 1988), pp. 181–228. The proton example is from G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford UP, 1977), p. 6. For an argument that ethical intuitions are not in general products of inference from background beliefs, part of which relies on the autonomy of ethics, see M. Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 103–4.

background theory. It might also turn out that intuitionists have other vital philosophical interests that they can only protect by rejecting Sturgeon's broad notion of inference and those applications of the autonomy of ethics which require such a notion.¹¹ Hence rejecting broad notions of inference might be the most obvious line of response for intuitionists to take.¹² But it is too early to say whether a plausible epistemology will require a fairly broad notion of what it is for a belief to be based on inference. Hence in what follows I assume that a 'yes' answer to this question is a live possibility. What is more, Sturgeon's main argument against ethical intuitionism is independent of dialectical considerations of how intuitionists tend to apply the autonomy of ethics. Even if some ethical beliefs are in fact not inferentially acquired, the view that such a belief can count as knowledge independently of whether it is reasonably inferable from other things one knows might still lead to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. Sturgeon's main argument against intuitionism does not therefore require the claim that the ethical beliefs which intuitionists would want to count as non-inferential knowledge are in fact based on inference.

IV. INTUITIONISM AND ETHICAL PERCEPTION

To begin assessing Sturgeon's argument, I shall distinguish two forms of ethical intuitionism by their answers to the question 'Assuming we have ethical knowledge, *how* do we have it?'. According to a *posteriori ethical intuitionism*, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential *a posteriori* knowledge. According to a *priori ethical intuitionism*, some of it is non-inferential *a priori* knowledge. (The core notion of the *a priori* is that a proposition counts as being knowable *a priori* as long as no positive appeal to experience is needed in order for it to be known, beyond whatever experience one needs in order to understand it. This notion is minimal, in that it allows us to treat *a priori* knowledge as defeasible by experience.¹³) Each version finds adherents in the intuitionist tradition, often to the exclusion of the other. But in fact they are compatible: it could be that we have both *a priori* and a *posteriori*

¹¹ Audi refers to Sturgeon for 'a quite different view of inference' in the context of distinguishing 'conclusions of inference' from 'conclusions of reflection': *The Good in the Right*, pp. 210 n. 12 and 45, respectively (cf. fn. 24 below). This distinction matters here only so far as we apply the autonomy of ethics in the familiar manner just to conclusions of reflection. Nothing that Audi says settles the extent to which this is the case.

¹² Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I need to address this possible line of response.

¹³ See, among many others, L. Bonjour, *In Defence of Pure Reason* (Cambridge UP, 1998), ch. 4; H. Field, 'Apriority as an Evaluative Notion', in P. Boghossian and C. Peacocke (eds), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 117–49; also Copp, 'Why Naturalism?'

non-inferential ethical knowledge. (They do exhaust the intuitionist options, however, assuming that knowledge which is not *a priori* is *a posteriori*.) I shall first consider whether a *posteriori* ethical intuitionism can escape Sturgeon's argument.

The standard way to understand a *posteriori* intuitionism is to model at least some of our ethical knowledge on (*quasi*-)perceptual knowledge (where expressions like 'ethical perception' and 'moral vision' need not be taken literally). If we have any non-inferential *a posteriori* knowledge, some of it is presumably had by perception. Similarly, it might be that we have at least some ethical knowledge by something broadly like perception of ethical facts. (Since perception is of particulars, such knowledge would presumably concern particular rather than general ethical facts.)

To make this more precise, one could say that one form of ethical cognition is perception-like in that it involves exercising a conceptually and intellectually sophisticated ability like the ability to see that a person is in pain or amused, or the ability to see that one can checkmate in five moves, or the ability to hear that one of the pistons is not firing or that a chord is C# minor. Gilbert Harman (p. 4) has produced a now famous example:

If you round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it, you do not need to *conclude* that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can *see* that it is wrong.

Michael Watkins and Kelly Dean Jolley suggest that knowing that what the hoodlums are doing is wrong is like knowing that a particular wine is fine, and that knowing the latter is like knowing that a wine has a start of herbs and dark berries: each can be known through exercising an acquired perceptual skill that is augmented by intellect.¹⁴ If we think that tasting a start of herbs and dark berries is no less a result of perceptual training than is tasting fineness in wine, we might well think that seeing that the hoodlums are torturing a cat for fun is no less a result of perceptual training than is seeing that their action is wrong. We might well think that in both cases successful training improves our capacity to recognize qualities that reside in the objects all along.¹⁵

The problem with this perceptual form of a *posteriori* intuitionism as we so far have it is that 'seeing' an action to be wrong might still be an inferential way of knowing that it is wrong. Harman himself writes that 'if you hold a

¹⁴ See M. Watkins and K.D. Jolley, 'Pollyanna Realism: Moral Perception and Moral Properties', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (2002), pp. 75–85, at pp. 77–8.

¹⁵ For similar claims, see D. McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 58; M. Johnston, 'The Authority of Affect', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63 (2001), pp. 181–214; T. Cuneo, 'Reidian Moral Perception', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (2003), pp. 229–58.

moral view, whether it is held consciously or unconsciously, you will be able to perceive rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, justice or injustice', but that such observations are 'theory-laden' in that 'what you perceive depends to some extent on the theory you hold' (Harman, pp. 5, 4). Presumably trained perceptual abilities deliver observations which are theory-laden in this way. But in that case ethical observations which do not require stopping to figure something out may none the less always involve inference in some broader sense of the term.¹⁶ (Given the autonomy of ethics, these would probably be inferences among whose premises are some ethical views one already has.) This means that more or less everyone, not just oenological intuitionists, can say that one way of knowing that a particular wine is fine is tasting its fineness. More or less everyone, not just ethical intuitionists, can say that one way of knowing that the hoodlums' action is wrong is seeing it to be wrong.¹⁷ By the same token, nothing in the perceptual form of *a posteriori* intuitionism as laid out so far rules out the possibility that the ethical knowledge we have by perception is none the less, at least in part, based on inference from other things we know. Hence *a posteriori* intuitionists have yet to show that perception provides ethical knowledge which is non-inferential in some broad but still reasonable sense of inference.

Let (OTL) be the claim that all observation is theory-laden. In responding to Sturgeon's objection, *a posteriori* intuitionists must first contest the claim that given (OTL), none of one's perceptual knowledge is based just on the experiences that one has, but rather is always based partly on reasonable inference from some background beliefs one has. To get going, they might follow James Pryor in noting that there are many senses in which observation might be theory-laden:

- OTL₁. What background beliefs one holds can causally affect what experiences one has
- OTL₂. One needs to have certain background beliefs before one is able even to entertain or form certain observational beliefs
- OTL₃. Background beliefs necessarily play a role in acquiring justification
- OTL₄. Background beliefs can defeat any justification one gets from experience.¹⁸

A posteriori intuitionists can agree that ethical perception would be theory-laden in the sense of (OTL₁) and (OTL₂). (OTL₁) concerns how one comes

¹⁶ For discussion, see Sturgeon, p. 205.

¹⁷ For a discussion that reaches this kind of conclusion, albeit via a slightly different argument, see S. McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18 (2004), pp. 209–28, at pp. 221–2.

¹⁸ J. Pryor, 'The Sceptic and the Dogmatist', *Noûs*, 34 (2000), pp. 517–49, at pp. 540–1.

to have the experiences one has in the first place: it is not about which transitions from experience to belief result in justified belief or knowledge.¹⁹ Given (OTL₁), our prior ethical views can causally affect what we perceive. This is compatible with having non-inferential ethical knowledge by perceiving ethical facts. Similarly with (OTL₂). A non-inferentially justified belief need not be a belief which one could be justified in holding without needing to hold any other beliefs. One might need certain background beliefs to possess the concepts necessary for even entertaining a given belief. But even when this is so, it does not follow that one's justification for holding the belief must be based even in part on whatever justification one has for holding those background beliefs.²⁰

(OTL₃) rules out the possibility of non-inferential perceptual knowledge and justification. (OTL₄) allows for defeasible non-inferential justification; whether it rules out non-inferential knowledge is a matter of dispute. But the above objection to the perceptual form of a *posteriori* intuitionism does not establish that ethical perception is theory-laden in the sense of (OTL₃) or (OTL₄). Harman's claim that 'what you see depends to some extent on the theory you hold' implies only (OTL₁). The objection is also compatible with the possibility that beliefs based on observations which are theory-laden in the sense of (OTL₁) or (OTL₂) do not depend for their status as knowledge on inference even if their causal aetiology involves unconscious inference. Imagine, for example, that you turn to me in a loud rock concert and I hear you say 'Awesome solo!'. Suppose I come to have this experience only because my brain merges auditory and facial movement signals into a unified experience (and uses context and prior knowledge in other ways, too) to repair degraded sounds and resolve ambiguities.²¹ (I did not hear you say 'Oh, some solo!'.) The process of 'multisensory integration' by which I come to have my speech perception then involves inference in some fairly broad sense. But my knowledge that you said 'Awesome solo!' could still be based directly on my experience and count as non-inferential in the relevant sense. Likewise, many people think that I can know non-inferentially that there are black marks on a white surface in front of me on the basis of my visual experience of black marks on a white surface. The evidence on the basis of

¹⁹ As Pryor quips, your sunglasses 'causally affect your experiences, but none of your perceptual beliefs is justified to any extent by your sunglasses': 'The Sceptic and the Dogmatist', p. 540.

²⁰ In this paragraph I largely follow Pryor, 'The Sceptic and the Dogmatist', pp. 533–4, 540–1. Like him, I ignore the question whether, and how, we can draw a distinction between 'observation' and 'theory'. This question deserves discussion, however, since it matters whether every ethical belief is a theoretical belief (and in what sense). Sturgeon seems to think yes, whereas Audi thinks no: 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', p. 110.

²¹ See, e.g., L.M. Miller and M. D'Esposito, 'Perceptual Fusion and Stimulus Coincidence in the Cross-Modal Integration of Speech', *Journal of Neuroscience*, 25(25) (2005), pp. 5884–93.

which I know that you said ‘Awesome solo!’ or that there are black marks on a white surface in front of me is not distinct from my hearing you say ‘Awesome solo!’ or seeing black marks on a white surface.²²

Following this model, *a posteriori* intuitionists could modify the perceptual account so that it holds that we have some ethical knowledge by perceiving ethical facts, where this knowledge is not based on distinct evidence.²³ The ethical knowledge we have by perceiving ethical facts depends for its status as knowledge neither on inference from distinct non-ethical evidence nor on inference from prior ethical views and distinct non-ethical evidence.

Two friends of mine illustrate a worry about whether we have the kind of non-inferential ethical knowledge that the modified perceptual account says we have. Greg, a wine maker, reports that in tasting wine he seeks for certain non-evaluative qualities as a basis for judging whether the wine is fine. Michael, a wine connoisseur, reports that he can taste fineness in wine. The modified account implies that when Greg and Michael both know that a particular wine is fine, they know this in very different ways: Greg’s knowledge is explicitly based on distinct premises which are noted as evidence, whereas Michael’s is not. But it would be surprising if their knowledge were so very different. It is not because Greg is lacking in training, sensitivity or discriminative ability that his knowledge is based on non-evaluative evidence that the wine is fine. A critic like Sturgeon might then suggest that Greg’s and Michael’s perceptual abilities are not different in kind, but rather involve the same kinds of prior beliefs, expectations, training and inferences from certain sensory inputs to certain evaluative conclusions. Greg and Michael might instead differ merely with respect to how explicit their inferences are. Then Michael’s oenological knowledge would be no less inferential than Greg’s in an epistemologically relevant sense.²⁴

There is a reply to this worry. When in Harman’s example I experience what the hoodlums are doing as wrong, my experience represents their action as being wrong. Suppose for now that examples like this show that

²² My formulation here reflects the view that evidence consists in some cognitive grasp of facts, propositions, or ‘contents’. But I have no problem with the alternative view that evidence consists in facts or propositions and it is *having* evidence that consists in some cognitive grasp of them.

²³ I take the expression ‘distinct evidence’ from McGrath, who defends the view that we ‘have moral knowledge by perceiving moral facts, and this perceptual knowledge does not rest on non-moral evidence’ (p. 223). (She does not say what counts as ‘resting on’.) For a related but more detailed position, see J. Greco, *Putting Sceptics in their Place* (Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 241–4. Neither McGrath nor Greco endorses foundationalism, however, since neither claims that all the rest of our ethical knowledge is based on perceptual ethical knowledge.

²⁴ This case might also cast doubt on the epistemological, as opposed to psychological, relevance of Audi’s distinction between ‘conclusions of reflection’ and ‘conclusions of inference’ (*The Good in the Right*, pp. 45–6; cf. fn. 11 above).

experiences can represent ethical properties as being instantiated, so that if there are ethical properties that are instantiated, then we can *correctly* represent them as being instantiated. (But it is a substantive question whether experiences can represent ethical properties in the same way as they represent colours, shapes, motion, and whatever else is plausibly represented in experience.) The reply I have in mind is to say that at least some experiences which correctly represent an ethical property as being instantiated are perceptions of this ethical property as being instantiated. (In the relevant sense, ‘perceiving’, and correspondingly ‘seeing’, are factive.) This is not a trivial move, although discussions of ethical perception often make it without argument. Even if experiences can correctly represent that properties of kind *K* are instantiated, these experiences do not count as perception unless their relation to what they represent is sufficiently direct. Thus, even if experiences which represent properties such as colours, shapes and motion count as perceptions because in these cases the relation is sufficiently direct to count as perception, a substantive question remains whether the same is the case with ethical properties. (Parallel issues arise about whether experiences can represent causal relations, whether one can perceive causal relations or whether all one can perceive is a sequence of events minus its causal nature, and how direct the relation between the two is.²⁵)

This reply speaks to the issue at hand. If we could not perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then those ethical beliefs which *a posteriori* intuitionists want to count as non-inferential knowledge would have to be based at least in part on distinct non-ethical evidence. We could not form ethical beliefs on the basis of perception in any sense that requires ethical properties to be properly attributed to contents of perception. We could only do so in the sense in which I believe that my neighbour is out of town on the basis of such distinct evidence as finding that her curtains are drawn, that her mailbox is overstuffed, and that repeated ringings of her doorbell go unanswered.²⁶ It seems, in other words, that perception can give ethical knowledge which is not based on distinct evidence only if we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated.

The cost of the reply is that establishing that we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated is a tall order. We cannot establish this solely on the basis of such phenomenological data as that in cases like Harman’s people seem to be ‘just seeing’ an action to be wrong. Such data alone do

²⁵ See S. Siegel, ‘The Contents of Perception’, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/perception-contents>, §4.

²⁶ This example is from S. Siegel, ‘Which Properties are Represented in Perception?’, in T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds), *Perceptual Experience* (Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 481–503, at p. 481.

not even suffice to establish that reports like this are reports of perceptual experience. Everything I have said here so far leaves open the possibility that our experiences represent ethical properties, but do so because we have experiences which represent certain non-ethical properties and which we tend to process, more or less unconsciously, through our prior ethical views, and other background beliefs, expectations and abilities that we have. Thus even if we analyse cases like Harman's as involving experience which represents the hoodlums' action as wrong, what might be going on is that we infer in some fairly automatic fashion that the action is wrong from a perception which represents the hoodlums burning the cat or (more contentiously) causing the cat to suffer and die, plus our prior views concerning the wrongness of causing a sentient creature to suffer and die. We cannot just assume that this kind of relation between experiences and the ethical facts they represent is sufficiently direct for them to count as perception. So we cannot just assume that we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated.

Still, if we could perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then *a posteriori* intuitionists could argue that some ethical knowledge is non-inferential even if all observation is theory-laden in the sense of (OTL₁) and (OTL₂). To argue that the relevant ethical beliefs do not depend on inference for their status as knowledge, they could argue that what properties we can perceive is partly a function of what concepts, abilities and training we possess. Could I not perceive that certain symbols mean 'That's a load of rubbish', even if someone who cannot read or knows no English could not perceive this?²⁷ Similarly, why could not the various cognitive dispositions that we have in virtue of our ethical training be among those that affect what properties we can perceive? If they were, then, for instance, accepting a principle to the effect that causing a sentient creature to suffer and die is wrong might well dispose me to perceive such actions as wrong. Dispositions do not seem to be the sort of things on which one can rely as premises in inference. But this kind of relation between experiences and what they represent might still be direct enough for them to count as perception.

Of course, this cognitive psychology is speculative. But it is a relevant alternative, because Sturgeon's argument that ethical beliefs are products of inference is not empirical. He notes (p. 203) that we need to explain why 'the only people with physical intuition worth trusting are those with extensive knowledge of highly sophisticated, approximately true physical theory and lot of experience in applying it', and why such beliefs 'tend to be most reliable when the background assumptions on which they rest are true'. He

²⁷ For an argument, illustrated with an example involving Cyrillic characters, that which concepts one possesses can causally influence what contents one's experiences possess, see C. Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts* (MIT Press, 1992), p. 89.

then argues that these facts suggest that a belief like ‘There goes a proton’ must be based on inference if it is to count as knowledge. Since ethical beliefs are essentially similar to physical beliefs with respect to the conditions under which they are reliable, we should treat the two in the same way.

The alternative that the *a posteriori* intuitionist can offer is that we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated because our ethical background beliefs endow us with cognitive dispositions to do so. If true, this would provide an epistemologically credible account of why perceptual ethical beliefs tend to be most reliable when we have (at least approximately) true ethical background beliefs, and why some of them can none the less count as non-inferential knowledge. Yet if we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, it does not follow that in a similar way perception also gives us non-inferential knowledge about topics like the past, the future or the unobservable. Whether we can *perceive* properties of a given kind is largely something to settle case by case. Hence we also cannot object that the present defence of *a posteriori* ethical intuitionism shows too much, on the ground that a parallel defence of *a posteriori* intuitionism about extra-sensory perception concerning the past, the future or the unobservable would be equally plausible. That view stands or (more probably) falls with the issue of whether our experiences can be sufficiently directly related to extra-sensory properties to count as perceptions of such properties as being instantiated. (It may also be relevant that Sturgeon is operating with a naturalistic rationale for the autonomy of ethics. Extra-sensory perception seems to fit less easily with a naturalistic view of the world than ethical intuitionism does.)

To summarize: if we can perceive ethical properties as being instantiated, then *a posteriori* intuitionists can explain how there can be non-inferential ethical knowledge, without thereby committing themselves to non-inferential knowledge in areas outside ethics where the existence of such knowledge would be implausible. This would undermine the kind of parity argument that Sturgeon runs against ethical intuitionism. But the question remains whether it would commit *a posteriori* intuitionists to an implausible epistemology within ethics. That depends crucially on what kinds of properties we can perceive as being instantiated and whether ethical properties are among them. Nothing that is said here settles these outstanding questions in the philosophy of perception. But so long as these questions remain unresolved, any support for *a posteriori* intuitionism should be merely conditional.

V. INTUITIONISM AND SELF-EVIDENCE

According to a *priori* ethical intuitionism, some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential *a priori* knowledge. Most *a priori* intuitionists follow Sir David Ross in holding that such knowledge would concern self-evident principles of *prima facie* duty.²⁸ Self-evidence is an epistemic property of a proposition which characterizes a way of knowing it. A self-evident proposition is a truth any adequate understanding of which is such that (a) one has justification for believing the proposition in virtue of having that understanding of it, and (b) if one believes the proposition on the basis of that understanding, then one knows it.²⁹ An adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition need not depend on anything beyond itself for the knowledge it can give of the proposition's truth.

Many standard objections to a *priori* intuitionism fail because they construe the notion of self-evidence more strongly than this. Even coming to understand, let alone believe, a self-evident proposition may take time and serious reflection. A proposition may then be self-evident even if its truth is not immediately evident or even if some who understand it do not believe it nor find it obvious or compelling. Nor does adequately understanding a self-evident proposition require grasping its modal or epistemic status. For although self-evident propositions are *a priori* knowable, believing such a proposition is consistent with not believing that it is self-evident, with believing that it is not self-evident, and with lacking the concept of self-evidence. Hence various kinds of disagreement about whether some given ethical propositions are self-evident do not show that those propositions are not self-evident. Likewise, even if self-evident propositions are necessary truths, believing one is consistent with not believing that it is necessary. So the truth of a self-evident proposition could be non-inferentially knowable even if knowledge of its modal and epistemic status were inferential.³⁰

²⁸ See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), ch. 2; Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', and *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: a Defence* (Oxford UP, 2003), ch. 11. For a form of *a priori* intuitionism which claims not to require any moral truths to be self-evident, see Huemer, p. 106.

²⁹ I take this definition from Audi, 'Self-Evidence', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999), pp. 205–28, at p. 206, and *The Good in the Right*, pp. 48–9. Cf. BonJour, p. 120.

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of these replies, as well as other objections and replies, see Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', and *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; Shafer-Landau, pp. 250–65; P. Stratton-Lake, 'Introduction', in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 1–28, at pp. 18–23. See also Huemer, ch. 5.

What can defenders of this form of *a priori* intuitionism say in response to Sturgeon's objection to ethical intuitionism? There is an initial defensive move that is independent of the claim that the ethical propositions which we can allegedly know non-inferentially are self-evident. *A priori* intuitionists can complain that both Sturgeon and *a posteriori* intuitionists model ethical beliefs too closely on observation. Observation seems to be a poor model both for ethical judgements in actual cases of trying to determine what one ought to do and for judgements about hypothetical cases. We cannot know an action to be wrong by seeing it to be wrong if no action which we could see to be wrong is yet on the scene. We cannot model all ethical thought on spectator sports or arts. Moreover, Sturgeon's paradigm case of ethical intuition – seeing that what Harman's hoodlums are doing is wrong – concerns a particular ethical claim. But even if all particular ethical beliefs were based on inference, it would not follow that all general ones (such as principles of *prima facie* duty) are likewise based on inference. By the autonomy of ethics, they cannot be reasonably inferred from purely non-ethical claims. It is not clear why every general ethical claim would have to be reasonably inferable from some yet further ethical claims. But if not, then why should every general ethical claim that we know depend for its status as knowledge on whether that is the case?

To return to self-evidence, *a priori* intuitionists can allow an ample role for inference in belief formation without compromising the possibility of non-inferential ethical knowledge. It is no problem if a proposition which is knowable solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of it may be knowable also by inference from premises. It is also no problem if being able to understand a proposition adequately may require the capacity to draw inferences which serve to bring out the content of the proposition, such as inferences concerning its application to cases. Since the inferences which one must thereby be able to draw are inferences *from* rather than *to* a proposition, the fact that coming to understand a self-evident proposition may involve inference does not show that believing it on the basis of understanding it is a product of inference. Nor does it show that the belief depends for its status as knowledge on inference from premises about the proposition's implications.³¹

A priori intuitionists can also accommodate various versions of Sturgeon's claim that ethical beliefs are theory-laden in much the same way as physical observations are. They can accommodate an analogue of (OTL₂). We may indeed require certain background beliefs to understand a self-evident proposition. For example, understanding the proposition that gleefully

³¹ See again the references listed in fn. 30 above.

flogging an infant to death is (*pro tanto*) wrong may require theoretical beliefs about what pain and biological death are.³² So, by analogy with (OTL₂), being able to understand certain propositions may require having certain background beliefs. But this does not show that a belief which is based on an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition would have its status as knowledge based on reasonable inference from those background beliefs.³³ *A priori* intuitionists can also accommodate an analogue of (OTL₄). Nowadays *a priori* intuitionists tend to advocate accounts of the *a priori* which allow the possibility of having non-inferential ethical knowledge on the basis of adequate understanding of certain propositions, without any further positive appeal to experience, even if experience, background beliefs or inferences are capable of defeating our justification for believing those propositions.³⁴ Even if one adequately understands a self-evident proposition, one may become subject to factors that render one's understanding of it inadequate; or one may acquire stronger justification for believing another proposition incompatible with it.³⁵

The upshot here is that in so far as *a priori* intuitionism escapes objections to the existence of self-evident ethical truths, it also escapes Sturgeon's argument against ethical intuitionism. The existence of self-evident ethical truths would explain how non-inferential ethical knowledge is possible. But thinking that there are self-evident ethical truths does not commit one to the existence of self-evident truths also about such topics as the past, the future or the unobservable. Instead, whether there are self-evident truths in a given area is something that will have to be settled case by case. Ethical intuitionism carries no particular commitment in any of these other areas. In sum, then, if there are self-evident ethical truths, then one can accept both foundationalism and the autonomy of ethics without committing oneself to self-evident truths in areas where the existence of non-inferential knowledge that such truths can give would be implausible. *A priori* intuitionism is not therefore committed to an implausible epistemology outside ethics.

Whether *a priori* intuitionism is committed, in virtue of its commitment to self-evident ethical truths, to an implausible epistemology *within* ethics is a more difficult question. Many intuitionists are able to offer at least some

³² See Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', p. 112; Shafer-Landau, p. 248.

³³ Certain background beliefs, such as theories which one holds about other adjacent matters, may likewise prevent the manifestation of the belief-forming dispositions which one has in virtue of an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition, thereby in effect 'masking' the manifestation of those dispositions. For what can serve as an example of this, see Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', pp. 127–8.

³⁴ See again the references listed in fn. 13 above, as well as Audi, *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; Huemer, ch. 5.

³⁵ See Audi, 'Self-Evidence', p. 219.

examples of ethical propositions which seem true to a broad range of subjects once they think they have understood the propositions in question but before they entertain arguments for or against them. Examples might be that enjoyment is better than suffering, that gleefully flogging an infant to death is *pro tanto* wrong, and that punishing people for crimes they did not commit is unjust. But it is unclear whether these propositions make substantive ethical claims. Are suffering or punishment, for example, concepts which yield substantive ethical claims? Unless there are *substantive* ethical truths which are knowable *a priori* and non-inferentially, intuitionists will have difficulty accounting for much of what is taken to be ethical knowledge. We cannot reasonably infer substantive ethical claims just from such non-substantive claims as ‘Murder is wrong’.

I have also yet to see a reliable test for determining whether a proposition is self-evident. Some ethical claims, such as perhaps the principles of equality which the Declaration of Independence declares to be self-evident, may be such that it is hard to know where to begin arguing for them. Instead we tend to make sure that those who disagree have understood the claim and are not crazy. But such claims are not supposed to exhaust the class of self-evident ethical propositions even by *a priori* intuitionists’ own lights. We can also hardly assume that it is a reliable test to ask people whether a proposition seems true to them once they think they have understood it but before they entertain arguments for or against it. Many propositions which are false or at least require argument may none the less seem true to us owing to the influence of such potentially distorting factors as partiality, prejudice, emotion, or certain kinds of upbringing.³⁶ A critic like Sturgeon could well also say that even when we are not subject to distorting factors, our assessment of a given proposition is often influenced, in a broadly inferential way, by our background beliefs.

Even if we have no reliable test for determining which propositions are substantive self-evident ethical truths, such truths might exist all the same. Here I have nothing new or significant to say for or against the arguments that intuitionists have given for their existence.³⁷ But in all fairness, since *a priori* ethical intuitionists are not committed to the existence of substantive self-evident truths outside ethics, Sturgeon’s argument does not by itself show that no such truths exist in ethics. For example, the naturalistic rationale that he offers for the autonomy of ethics is compatible with

³⁶ Compare W. Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology’, in T. Horgan and M. Timmons (eds), *Metaethics after Moore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 339–66, and *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford UP, 2006), ch. 9.

³⁷ See Ross, ch. 2; Shafer-Landau, ch. 11; Audi, *The Good in the Right*, ch. 2; Huemer, ch. 5; Crisp, ch. 3.

defeasible *a priori* ethical knowledge.³⁸ Against *a priori* intuitionism, then, Sturgeon's objection is at the very least incomplete in an important respect. A neglected worry remains, however, about the existence of substantive self-evident ethical truths. It reprises old worries about the synthetic *a priori*.

Most of those who think that there are analytic truths would have no objection to the claim that some analytic truths are self-evident. But such apparently analytic truths as that murder is wrong are not substantive. Substantive ethical truths should be synthetic. Hence *a priori* ethical intuitionism requires that there are self-evident synthetic ethical truths. But how is it supposed to be possible to have justification to believe substantive synthetic ethical truths solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of them? *A priori* intuitionists must explain how this can be so.

A priori intuitionists argue that there is no general problem with synthetic self-evident truths by noting that on reflection such sentences as 'Nothing is both green and red all over' seem *a priori* and self-evident but not analytic.³⁹ But perhaps the best known contemporary account of analyticity, Paul Boghossian's epistemic account, says that a statement 'is "true by virtue of its meaning" provided that grasp of its meaning alone suffices for justified belief in its truth'.⁴⁰ This counts 'Whatever is red all over is not blue' as analytic (p. 368). But now analyticity is effectively equivalent to self-evidence. How can *a priori* intuitionists then hold that we have some synthetic *a priori* knowledge in ethics based on an adequate understanding of self-evident propositions? They appear to have three options: they may argue (1) that epistemically analytic claims can be relevantly substantive; (2) that the epistemic notion of analyticity is somehow ill founded; (3) that an adequate understanding of a self-evident proposition may require more than grasp of its meaning.

Option (1) is too weak if there is a purely semantic explanation of a sentence's being analytic in the epistemic sense. Boghossian thinks that there must be. For 'something about the sentence's meaning, or about the way that meaning is fixed, must explain how its truth is knowable' by 'mere grasp of [its] meaning' (p. 366). Defending epistemic analyticity 'requires showing only that certain sentences are such that, *if* someone knows the relevant facts about their meaning, *then* that person will be in a position to form a justified belief about their truth' (p. 386). But simply knowing the

³⁸ For a form of ethical naturalism that is a case in point, see Copp.

³⁹ Audi says this after having argued that a self-evident truth may not be analytic in the sense of being a truth that is 'grounded in a simple containment relation of concepts' ('Self-Evidence', p. 222). Huemer says that the colour sentence seems obvious on reflection although we have no analytic definition of 'red' and 'green', let alone a derivation of the sentence from them (pp. 111–12).

⁴⁰ P. Boghossian, 'Analyticity Reconsidered', *Noûs*, 30 (1996), pp. 360–91, at p. 363.

relevant meaning-facts about substantive ethical propositions should not be sufficient for having justification for believing them. Otherwise it is hard to see what role substantive ethical thought would play in finding out moral truths.

Option (2) might help *a priori* intuitionism if epistemic analyticity had nothing in particular to do with the slogan that analyticity is ‘truth in virtue of meaning’. We might think that it will not, if the relevant meaning-facts need not be available to just anyone competent in the language, since in that case it could be that a truth is analytic and yet not knowable by just anyone who understands the proposition in question. For example, Boghossian includes facts about how ‘meaning is fixed’ among the relevant facts. But many terms (including terms that can figure in analytic truths) are such that one may not, merely in virtue of being competent in the language, be in a position to know what fixes their meaning. This may be a reason to prefer an account of analyticity which makes it possible that a truth is analytic but has no particularly special epistemic status.⁴¹ On such an account, substantive self-evident ethical truths could count as synthetic. But if *a priori* intuitionism rests on the rejection of epistemic accounts of analyticity, fully assessing it requires us first to resolve debates about analyticity in the philosophy of language. We might also wonder what more, or other, than knowing the relevant meaning-facts would need to go into an adequate understanding of a proposition if the proposition were to have the kind of special epistemic status that is characteristic of self-evidence.

Hence option (3). Robert Audi says that the relevant notion of adequate understanding implies ‘being able to apply [the proposition] to ... an appropriately wide range of cases, and being able to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from a certain range of close relatives, and to comprehend its elements and some of their relations’.⁴² But this account fails to make a sufficient difference. While Boghossian does not fully specify what knowing the relevant meaning-facts implies, he claims (p. 384) that ‘at least some of an expression’s inferential liaisons are relevant to fixing its meaning’. If that is right, then knowing the relevant meaning-facts about a proposition requires being able to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from a range of close relatives, and to comprehend its elements and certain of their relations. How is adequate understanding then meant to differ from grasp of the relevant meaning-facts? *A priori* intuitionists also still

⁴¹ For recent discussions of analyticity with this kind of thrust, see B. Jackson, *Species of Meanings: a Study of Semantic Kinds and Semantic Structure* (Cornell University, PhD dissertation, 2005), ch. 2; G. Russell, *Truth in Virtue of Meaning* (Oxford UP, forthcoming). See also N. Salmon, ‘Analyticity and Apriority’, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 7 (1993), pp. 125–33, at p. 130.

⁴² Audi, ‘Self-Evidence’, p. 208. See also the surrounding discussion and Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 50.

owe their critics an account of what more than knowing the relevant meaning-facts an adequate understanding of a proposition can require, if its truth is still to be *self-evident*.

To summarize: if there are substantive self-evident ethical truths, then *a priori* intuitionists can explain how there can be non-inferential ethical knowledge without thereby committing themselves to non-inferential knowledge in areas where the existence of such knowledge would be implausible. This would undermine the kind of parity argument that Sturgeon runs against ethical intuitionism. But the question remains how an ethical (or any other kind of) proposition can be such that an adequate understanding of it puts one in a position to know that it is true, but facts about its meaning or how that meaning is fixed do not alone explain why its truth is knowable solely on the basis of an adequate understanding of it. Nothing that is said here settles this outstanding question in the philosophy of language. But so long as the existence of synthetic self-evident ethical truths remains unresolved, any support for *a priori* ethical intuitionism should be merely conditional.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ethical intuitionism is the view that some of our ethical knowledge is non-inferential. I have considered the following objection to this view: if ethical intuitionists accept the autonomy of ethics on the ground that assessment of evidence is in general theory-dependent, then their foundationalism about knowledge commits them to an implausible epistemology outside ethics. I have explained how both *a priori* and *a posteriori* ethical intuitionists can avoid an implausible epistemology outside ethics. But in both cases I have also argued that whether these responses provide intuitionists with a plausible epistemology *within* ethics depends on how certain unsettled issues in other areas of philosophy are resolved. The adequacy of *a posteriori* intuitionism depends on an outstanding issue in the philosophy of perception, that of *a priori* intuitionism on an issue in the philosophy of language. Which (if either) of these forms of ethical intuitionism one should prefer depends on which (if either) of these outstanding issues turns in favour of the philosophical commitments of each. I do not know the answer to this question. Therefore I conclude that although ethical intuitionism escapes Sturgeon's objection, support for intuitionism should for now remain merely conditional.

There are, of course, other recent objections to ethical intuitionism. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues in great detail that we have no

non-inferential ethical knowledge because (a) we know from empirical research that very many ethical beliefs are partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, or explicable by an unreliable source; (b) any given ethical belief of ours can count as knowledge only if we have reason to think that it is an exception to this general trend; but (c) we can have reason to think that a given belief is exceptionally not subject to distorting factors only if we are able to confirm the belief by inferring it from other beliefs (such as beliefs to the effect that the belief has been formed in a reliable way).⁴³ I cannot here settle whether ethical intuitionists can answer this objection. But I suggest that their responses will be subject to the same moral as I have drawn about intuitionist responses to Sturgeon's objection.

Ethical intuitionists allow that truths which can be known non-inferentially might also be known on the basis of inference. Hence the force of Sinnott-Armstrong's objection depends on how plausible it is that if very many ethical beliefs are subject to distortion, then any ethical belief counts as knowledge only when, and to that extent *because*, the believer is able to confirm the belief by inferring it from other beliefs. (That is, only when the belief derives its status as knowledge at least in part from the believer's having this inferential ability.) The truth of this claim is a general epistemological problem which has nothing special to do with ethical knowledge. Relevant to its solution are such issues as how, in general, a significant chance of the presence of epistemic defeaters bears on justification and knowledge, and whether certain general higher-order requirements on epistemic justification and knowledge are plausible. The problem also bears on the philosophical force of those epistemic principles, favoured by many contemporary foundationalists, according to which it is *prima facie* rationally permissible to assume that things are as they appear to be.⁴⁴ Any solution to the problem will imply a stand on these general epistemological issues. One might also wonder whether, and how plausibly, an argument against intuitionism which has nothing special to do with ethics would generalize to support a more global scepticism.

I suspect, then, that any response to Sinnott-Armstrong's objection to ethical intuitionism will carry specific commitments in outstanding issues in general epistemology. If this is right, then any support for ethical intuitionism should for now remain merely conditional in this respect as

⁴³ See Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moral Relativity and Intuitionism', *Philosophical Issues*, 12 (2002), pp. 305–28; 'Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology'; *Moral Scepticisms*, ch. 9. For an intuitionist response, see Shafer-Landau, 'A Defense of Ethical Intuitionism', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.), *Moral Psychology*, Vol. II: *The Cognitive Science of Morality* (MIT Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Among those who endorse such principles are Huemer, p. 99; Pryor, 'The Sceptic and the Dogmatist'.

well. The moral I draw is that in order to assess ethical intuitionism fully one must take a thorough account of various issues in other areas of philosophy – not only in epistemology, but also in the philosophy of mind and language, and beyond. Support for ethical intuitionism should accordingly remain conditional on how the relevant outstanding issues in these other areas are resolved. Thus ethical intuitionism depends for its viability less on anything special about ethics than on more general philosophical considerations. In this respect, at least, ethical intuitionism seems to be no different from other accounts of ethical knowledge which are currently on offer.⁴⁵

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