

***Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, edited by Philip Stratton-Lake. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, vii+305 pp.
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It is gratifying to see the current onslaught of centennial celebrations of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* preceded by this collection of twelve essays devoted to ethical intuitionism more generally.¹ The philosophical tradition of intuitionism can be loosely characterized as a family of the following doctrines: non-naturalism in moral metaphysics; the non-analyzability of moral predicates in non-normative terms in moral semantics; foundationalism in moral epistemology; the answerability of moral theory to the way we commonly really think and deliberate in moral methodology; and irreducible pluralism in normative ethics. (Many philosophers commonly identified as 'intuitionists' reject some of these doctrines.) Since the doctrines are distinct (albeit related via various anti-reductionist tendencies, among other things), it comes as no surprise that there is nearly as much philosophical controversy about which of them are central to intuitionism as there is about their correctness, either individually or in some or other combination.

Ethical Intuitionism is well worth close study. The essays it contains are generally of high quality, and occasionally excellent. They cover historical and current incarnations of most philosophical controversies about intuitionism—and more. For a number of contributors take up an element of intuitionism (loosely characterized) primarily as a stepping-stone for advancing their own distinctive philosophical agendas, and only secondarily as an object of critical evaluation. This isn't a criticism: the volume is all the worthier for making vivid the relevance of British intuitionists to contemporary debates in meta-ethics, moral methodology, and moral theory. The editor supplies an opinionated but helpfully substantive introduction to philosophical controversies surrounding intuitionism, as well as its historical rises and falls from figures such as Clarke and Price to the neo-intuitionism of Audi and others. I will first comment on the individual essays, and then take up one key issue.

Robert Audi leads off with a tentative case for treating Rossian principles of *prima facie* (or, better, *pro tanto*) duty as self-evident, and yet ontically grounded in, and integrated by, considerations of what is intrinsically good and bad (in a normative sense that entails the existence of reasons for action). (A proposition *p* is self-evident just in case understanding *p* is sufficient for having (a priori) justification to believe *p*, and also sufficient for knowing *p*, provided one believes *p* on the basis of understanding it.) Occasionally over-abundant with distinctions, the paper is careful not to overstate the case for the intriguing combination of views Audi is out to explore. Questions remain, of course. To mention just one, Audi's view is incompatible with 'buck-passing' accounts of value, but no argument is given for rejecting them.

Both Roger Crisp and Thomas Baldwin focus mainly on Sidgwick's extended discussion of Perceptual, Dogmatic, and Philosophical Intuitionism in *The Methods of Ethics*. Crisp takes Sidgwick to task for seeking a fundamental monistic principle that gives clear prescriptions in every case, on the grounds that the very application of the methodology of Philosophical Intuitionism requires judgment, in which case we should grant the need for judgment in particular cases as well. But he suggests that, freed of this mistaken emphasis, Philosophical Intuitionism provides a powerful way of resolving debates in normative ethics. Baldwin's assessment is less sympathetic: Sidgwick's hedonist axiology and the (in)famous dualism of practical reason illustrate how the results of his attempts at full practical precision are 'meager and unpersuasive' (p. 98), largely because he doesn't seek to vindicate his intuitions against a general theory of

practical reason and a critical understanding of localized institutions and cultural practices which inform common-sense moral judgments. But the complaint may leave intuitionism itself untouched: intuitionists new and old have sought to accommodate features of Aristotelian and/or Kantian approaches to practical reason (Audi's and Gaut's contributions to the present volume take steps in this direction), both of which properly understood leave room for cultural context.

In one of the book's highlights, Philip Stratton-Lake defends the intuitionist method of building moral theory on self-evident moral principles, knowable through reflection, against charges of dogmatism and bias. Stratton-Lake evaluates Ross's route from his conviction in *The Right and the Good* that pleasure is intrinsically good, via reflection on undeserved and vicious pleasures and the self-other asymmetry in the duty to promote pleasure, to assigning pleasure a distinctive form of extrinsic value (viz., being a worthy object of satisfaction) and moving away from the teleological conception of value in *The Foundations of Ethics*. Stratton-Lake's study of Ross's own case convincingly shows how demanding and rigorous reflection on our moral convictions can be within intuitionism.

Berys Gaut criticizes intuitionist appeals to self-evident moral principles, and defends a rather different approach to justifying moral pluralism, which appeals to reflective equilibrium, a 'value-grounded' conception of practical reasons, and a 'biological' conception of value, and the structure of which is captured by a kind of experiential foundationalism. But Gaut's rejection of self-evident moral principles falls short. The gist of his objection is that understanding a self-evident proposition requires grasping that it is self-evident, but we cannot credibly explain why many philosophers deny that various propositions about moral duties are self-evident by imputing to them a failure to understand those propositions. Knowing a self-evident proposition on the basis of adequate understanding of it doesn't, however, require knowing, of the proposition, that it is self-evident. Adequately understanding a self-evident proposition is therefore compatible with believing that it isn't self-evident.

Brad Hooker defends the importance of intuitions to moral theorizing in the framework of reflective equilibrium, but with an open door to self-evident moral principles. Hooker claims that our most confident intuitive convictions concern broadly 'Ross-style general principles' (of which he formulates several) and give us quite a lot of moral knowledge, but denies that the claim settles the issue of pluralism. Rather, 'the most exciting research programme in moral philosophy is to see whether ... there is some deeper unifying principle' underlying the plurality of Ross-style general principles (p. 183). Hooker is right that epistemological considerations in favor of a Rossian theory don't settle the issue of pluralism. But David McNaughton's paper (the only previously published contribution to the book) makes a persuasive case that, contrary to familiar objections, Ross's pluralism is neither less systematically unified than its major rivals, nor defective simply for failing to provide general principles for resolving conflicts of duties.

It is worth a mention that Gaut's and Hooker's essays give spirited evidence that, after decades of appropriation into coherentist circles, reflective equilibrium as a method of theory-selection is widely (and correctly) coming to be seen as compatible with foundationalism in the epistemology of moral belief.²

Another highlight is Nicholas Sturgeon's detailed discussion of the standard argument for the core epistemological thesis of intuitionism, namely that some of our ethical knowledge must be non-inferential. While Sturgeon's criticism of the standard argument can perhaps be resisted (see below), I have yet to see a clearer presentation of the argument or a more probing account of its role in the thinking of both intuitionists and their critics (including ethical naturalists such as Sturgeon).

Taking Moore's metaphysical non-naturalism in *Principia Ethica* as his foil, Allan Gibbard develops a form of expressivism that takes normative concepts to signify non-normative natural properties but not be analyzable in terms of (naturalistic concepts of) those properties. Gibbard takes 'ought' conclusions to amount to 'planning conclusions' about what to do, and argues that we, as planners, must all agree that there is a natural property that constitutes being the thing to do but that 'the thing to do' is a 'non-naturalistic' concept.³ The contentious claim here is that normative concepts amount to planning concepts, for it looks as though one could be a robust planning agent, with the conceptual resources needed to express one's plans, without possessing any normative concepts.

Jonathan Dancy thoroughly dissects Prichard's defense of 'subjective' intuitionism (in 'Duty and Ignorance of Fact'). Intuitionism is usually taken to imply that an agent's obligation is grounded in the objective features of her circumstances (which may include facts about the agent, such as her not knowing something). The subjective view that the obligation is grounded instead in features of the situation as the agent believes it to be has been largely neglected. (The neglect is curious, since Prichard's article spurred Ross to reject the objective view in favor of the subjective view in *The Foundations of Ethics*.) Dancy rightly finds Prichard's understanding of the relation between what one ought to do, given the facts, and what one ought to do, given one's beliefs, simplistic. His cure is to mix the subjective and the objective understanding of grounds of obligation in an overall objectivist style by taking the subjective question to specify an objective constraint on a combination of beliefs and action. But finding the right mixture calls for some serious philosophical pharmacy: Dancy's cure doesn't yet tell us how exactly epistemic considerations enter into what is true about what one ought to do (think, e.g., of cases where the agent is uncertain about what the non-moral facts are likely to be).

Stephen Darwall evaluates intuitionist accounts of moral motivation from Price onward. Intuitionists (except for Ross and Prichard, and perhaps Moore) have tended towards the 'internalist' view that there is a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated accordingly. This tendency is perhaps surprising. As Hume noted, if one thinks that fundamental moral propositions are self-evident objects of a priori cognition, then one must explain how cognition of them can move the will (let alone do so necessarily). Darwall argues in effect that intuitionists face a dilemma: given internalism, the best account of the practicality of pure reason is that it comes through practical reasoning, not through rational intuition, which leaves intuitionists without an explanation of moral motivation; but given externalism, moral motivation looks to require an independent desire to do whatever is right, which looks both to make a concern for rightness a fetish and to demote the essential action-guiding role of morality. Of particular interest is the implication of Darwall's that their anti-reductionism makes intuitionists unable to counter the second horn of the dilemma with a moral psychology that makes externalist moral motivation a non-fetishistic feature of integrated moral personality. (Recent externalist responses to the fetishism problem, in particular, give this strategy some plausibility.) Sidgwick, for one, seems to think that it is precisely because moral judgment is intrinsically action-guiding, but empirical (and other metaphysical) judgment isn't, that fundamental questions of ethics are irreducible to questions which the latter judgments concern. Intuitionists might begin to address Darwall's challenge by asking whether action-guidance really is as closely tied to motivation as Darwall assumes and whether ethical anti-reductionism is supportable independently of claims about moral motivation.

In the closing chapter, Robert Arrington develops a Wittgensteinian approach that treats such Rossian *pro tanto* principles as 'Lying is wrong' as 'grammatical propositions'

constitutive of concepts such as a lie. This may be a plausible view about analytic claims such as 'Murder is wrong', which don't purport to express substantive synthetic moral principles. But its implication that Rossian principles don't purport to be substantive moral principles seems incredible.

All told, these essays suggest (if sometimes unwittingly) that the most distinctive intuitionist thesis among the core claims in our loose characterization of intuitionism is the epistemological thesis that some of our ethical knowledge must be non-inferential. In covering also forms of intuitionism that liken moral judgment to perceptual judgment (as well as Gaut's 'experiential foundationalism'), the thesis is more general than the claim that some of our ethical knowledge must be non-inferential knowledge of self-evident moral propositions. As it also figures among the more contestable intuitionist tenets, it deserves close scrutiny.

Here is crudely how Sturgeon reconstructs the standard argument for the core epistemological thesis of intuitionism: (1) Foundationalism: if we have any knowledge that is based by reasonable inference on other things we know, that knowledge must all be ultimately based entirely on things we know non-inferentially. (2) The autonomy of ethics: from entirely non-ethical premises there is no reasonable inference to any ethical conclusion. Assuming that (3) we do have some ethical knowledge, it follows that (4) some of our ethical knowledge must be non-inferential. Sturgeon goes on to make an excellent case for the usefulness of thinking about intuitionism and its implications in the light of the standard argument, by using the argument to press the issue whether the kind of general epistemology which ethical intuitionism generates can be plausible.

The best reason to accept (2) seems to be that ethics is like many other areas of thought in being autonomous with respect to the observational evidence we bring to bear on them; consider e.g. ascriptions of psychological states or reasoning about unobservables and the future. But if so, then the standard argument should work just as well (or badly) with respect to any autonomous area of thought. Hence (1) seems to force ethical intuitionists to think that we have, in each autonomous area, some non-inferential knowledge which serves as a necessary basis for everything else we know in that area, on the pain of skepticism about the unobservable, the future, and many other topics. Non-skeptics who find this general epistemological commitment implausible must reject foundationalism, and so ethical intuitionism. (Sturgeon sketches coherentist and reliabilist versions of the idea that a belief's being justified is always a matter of its resting on the right sort of inference.)

Sturgeon's resistance to foundationalism is too sophisticated to be adequately discussed here, so I confine my comments on just one of his key claims. Sturgeon relies on a broad notion of a belief's being based on inference: what philosophers call intuitions are best seen as a product of inference that relies, possibly tacitly, on premises we may be unable to articulate. When people seem to move from purely non-ethical premises directly to ethical conclusions, we tend to think that they must be implicitly relying on further ethical assumptions, rather than think 'What terrible reasoning!' Applying the autonomy of ethics in this way presses intuitionists to adopt a generous notion of what counts as relying on an assumption in reasoning which is but a small step away from allowing that an entire piece of reasoning might be unconscious. The broad notion of inference is meant to be epistemologically well-motivated by what provides general grounds for (2), namely the ways in which assessments of evidence for theoretical hypotheses (including ethical ones) are theory-dependent. Just like the 'physical intuitions' of trained physicists, ethical intuitions tend to be most reliable when they rest on true background assumptions; and if physical intuitions are well-justified only to the extent that they do so, we shouldn't think that ethical intuition embodies genuine non-inferential knowledge either.

Intuitionists seem to me to have a potential relief point for the pressure Sturgeon puts on them. Sturgeon's conception of intuition may be too closely modeled on observation. His paradigm case of ethical intuition is the kind of case Gilbert Harman made famous: as you round a corner and see some punks setting a cat on fire, you can just *see* that what they are doing is wrong. But then Sturgeon's argument may not apply to intuitions which have allegedly self-evident general moral propositions as their contents. (The case for their being self-evident must, of course, be made out.) In trying to get a self-evident proposition into a clear focus, one may have to rely on various auxiliary assumptions (e.g., to see what the proposition implies in its application to particular cases). But it doesn't follow that the justification one acquires for believing the proposition upon coming to understand it is partly based by inference on those assumptions. More generally, intuitions may well be 'theory-laden' in ways that don't require the justification for them to be based on the relevant background assumptions.⁴

Whether Sturgeon's challenge to ethical intuitionism can be disarmed by co-opting its appealing insights into a foundationalist framework strikes me as an important issue for intuitionist moral epistemology. If that is right, I can claim to have closed with one illustration of the ways in which anyone interested in meta-ethics can benefit from thinking about ethical intuitionism and its implications in the light of the rich array of arguments to be found in *Ethical Intuitionism*.

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NOTES

1. Moore commemorations include T. Horgan & M. Timmons 2003, papers published in *Ethics* 113 (April 2003); and T. Horgan & M. Timmons 2006. Many of the papers in the present volume were presented at a conference at Keele University in June 1999.

2. For an early case for the compatibility, see DePaul 1986.

3. Gibbard's presentation of the view is highly compressed, but he has since developed it more fully in his *Thinking How To Live* (2003).

4. Cf. the discussion of the theory-ladenness of perception in James Pryor (2000), pp. 540–41.

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