

Comment on David Kaspar's *Intuitionism*

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1. Introduction

In his book *Intuitionism*,¹ David Kaspar is after the truth. That is to say, on his view, “philosophy is the search for the whole truth” (p. 7). *Intuitionism*, then, “reflects that standpoint” (p. 7). My comments are meant to reflect the same standpoint. More explicitly, my aim in these comments is to evaluate the arguments for intuitionism, as I understand them from reading Kaspar’s book. In what follows, I focus on three arguments in particular, which can be found in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of *Intuitionism*: an inference to the best explanation, an argument from the analogy between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge, and an argument from the epistemic preferability of the intuitive principles. I will discuss them in this order.

2. Intuitionism and Inference to the Best Explanation

What is intuitionism? According to Kaspar, “Intuitionism is the moral theory which claims that *you know what’s right*” (p. 2). More precisely, as I understand it, intuitionism consists of the following theses:

- (I1) We have moral knowledge in the form of fundamental moral principles, or “intuitive principles,” such as “Keeping promises is required” and “Harming others is wrong” (p. 16).
- (I2) The intuitive principles are self-evident, *a priori* truths (p. 36).
- (I3) The intuitive principles cannot be proved (p. 54); we know that they are true by intellectual intuition, that is, they intellectually appear true to us (p. 63).
- (I4) The intuitive principles are necessary truths (p. 63).

¹ David Kaspar, *Intuitionism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). All references to the book in the symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

Given this characterization of intuitionism, in what follows I will be concerned with the following question: What are the arguments in support of (I1)-(I4)? (Henceforth, by “intuitionism” I mean theses [I1] through [I4].)

I think that the overall argument for intuitionism in Kaspar’s *Intuitionism* is supposed to be an Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE). As Kaspar writes:

[I]ntuitionism claims that *the best way to explain* both the convincingness and the persistence of certain moral beliefs, such as the promise principle, is to assert that they are self-evidently true. (p. 41, emphasis added)

That is to say, Kaspar lists what he takes to be common beliefs about morality (p. 3):

- (a) You know what’s right. (For instance, you know that “Depriving others of liberty is wrong,” that “Keeping promises is required,” and that “Harming others is wrong” [p. 16].)
- (b) Not everything is black and white.
- (c) Sometimes, in extreme cases, it is morally permissible to lie, steal, and so on.
- (d) We each feel more confident claiming that we have a duty to keep our promises, for example, than claiming that other people do.
- (e) There are emergencies in which a cold cost-benefit assessment makes the most moral sense.
- (f) There is no way to prove that, for instance, harming others is wrong.
- (g) Ethics is not a hard science.
- (h) Supreme principle moral theories, such as utilitarianism or Kantianism, are not initially convincing, and are often not ultimately convincing.
- (i) There is no satisfactory way to resolve some moral disagreements at certain times.
- (j) Most of our duties are based on particular relations we have to other people.

- (k) Moral absolutism was more plausible before the twentieth century, and less plausible during and after the twentieth century.
- (l) Moral disagreement is common.

He then argues that intuitionism explains why we have these common beliefs about morality better than its competitors do (p. 23). As he writes:

Both the persistence of moral beliefs across eras and the persistence of the primary data of ethics are *best explained* by the intuitive principles being self-evidently true. (p. 24, emphasis added)

For example, as far as (a) is concerned, in particular, knowing that “Harming others is wrong,” Kaspar says the following:

“Harming others is wrong” is a fundamental moral truth. We know this, and we are secure in our knowledge of this. We are not apt to disagree about moral propositions of this sort. The reason why, according to intuitionism, is that such propositions are self-evidently true. And the reason we know them is that our minds can adequately understand these propositions, and know them on that basis. (p. 17)

More generally, for any belief that p (where p is a fundamental moral statement, such as “Harming others is wrong” or “Keeping promises is required”), we believe that p because p is self-evidently true.

I think that there is a potential problem with this argumentative strategy, namely, arguing for intuitionism by IBE. In order to see the problem, take the first item on Kaspar’s list, which intuitionism is supposed to explain better than its competitors, namely, “(a) You know what’s right” (p. 3), for example, you know that keeping promises is required. The IBE would then go as follows:

- (1) You believe that you know that keeping promises is required.
- (2) The best explanation for (1) is that “keeping promises is required” is self-evidently true (i.e., [I2]).

Therefore, probably,

- (3) [I2] is true.

The key premise in this IBE, of course, is the second premise. To evaluate this IBE, then, we need to ask: Is the (self-evident) truth of a belief really the best explanation for the fact that you hold that belief? After all, we often believe falsehoods, and we often believe truths, but for the wrong reasons. Moreover,

sometimes the best explanation for why one holds a particular belief is *psychological*, in terms of the genesis of the belief, not *epistemic* or *semantic* (i.e., in terms of justification or truth). For example, the best explanation for why Sheena believes that God exists may be that she was raised in a religious household rather than that she carefully considered the arguments for and against theism. Likewise, the best explanation for why we have modal intuitions may be that essentialism is a reasoning heuristic or mental shortcut, not that objects have real essences.²

In other words, our beliefs are not always sensitive to the truth. If this is correct, then (I2) would best explain (a) only if our beliefs about morality track moral truth. To assume that our beliefs about morality track moral truth, however, is to assume that our beliefs about morality amount to knowledge, at least on some conceptions of knowledge,³ which is precisely the question at hand. In other words, intuitionism is the view that we have moral knowledge. However, the aforementioned IBE for intuitionism works only if it is assumed that our beliefs about morality track the truth about morality, that is, that they amount to knowledge.

I think that a similar problem arises with respect to other items on Kaspar's list. Take, for example, "(f) There is no way to prove that, for instance, harming others is wrong" (p. 3). The IBE for intuitionism, then, would go as follows:

- (1) We believe that there is no way to prove that harming others is wrong.
- (2) The best explanation for (1) is that "'Harming others is wrong' cannot be proved" is self-evidently true (i.e., [I2]).

Therefore, probably,

- (3) (I2) is true.

As in the case of the first IBE, the key premise of this IBE is the second premise. In order to evaluate this IBE, then, we need to ask again: Is the (self-evident) truth of a belief really the best explanation for the fact that you hold that belief? As mentioned above, our beliefs are not always sensitive to the truth. If this is correct, then "'Harming others is wrong' cannot be proved" would best explain the fact that we believe it only if our belief tracks the truth. But again, to assume that our beliefs about morality track the truth about morality is to assume that our beliefs about morality amount to knowledge, at

² See Moti Mizrahi, "Essentialism: Metaphysical or Psychological," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 40 (2014), pp. 65-72.

³ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 179.

least on some conceptions of knowledge,⁴ which is precisely the question at hand. In other words, intuitionism is the view that we have moral knowledge. However, the aforementioned IBE for intuitionism works only if it is assumed that our beliefs about morality track the truth about morality, that is, that they amount to knowledge.

This potential problem with the IBE for intuitionism does not amount to a decisive objection, but I think that it urges intuitionists to get clear on concepts like knowledge and about what counts as the best explanation for our moral beliefs. To be clear, I am not trying to saddle intuitionists with the difficult task of analyzing knowledge. However, insofar as the theory itself is stated in terms of *knowledge*—in particular, theses (I1) and (I3)—I think that it is important to get clear on the concept in question in order to make the IBE for intuitionism work.

3. An Argument from the Analogy of Moral and Mathematical Knowledge

Kaspar points out that intuitionists like H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross compare moral knowledge to mathematical knowledge (pp. 25, 33, 35, 44-48, 66-67, and 71-72). For example:

When we learn the basic concepts and notations of arithmetic, we can apprehend the truth of $2 + 2 = 4$. Intuitionism claims that everyone can apprehend the truth of “Harming others is wrong” in a similar way. (p. 43)

Recall that, according to intuitionism, what we know are the intuitive principles. In that case, an analogical argument for moral knowledge can be made as follows:

(1) Mathematical propositions (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$) are self-evident and are known to be necessarily true *a priori*.

(2) The intuitive principles (e.g., “Harming others is wrong”) are self-evident.

Therefore, probably,

(3) The intuitive principles are known to be necessarily true *a priori* (i.e., [I4]).

The similarity between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge, then, is that both are of self-evident propositions. Let us grant this similarity between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge for the sake of argument. As far as analogical arguments are concerned, they can be stronger

⁴ Ibid.

or weaker depending on the strength of the analogy. If there are more similarities than dissimilarities between the things compared, the analogy is strong. Conversely, if there are more dissimilarities than similarities between the things compared, the analogy is weak. In this case, we have a point of similarity between mathematical and moral knowledge: the propositions known are self-evident. Are there any points of dissimilarity between mathematical and moral knowledge? I think there might be. Consider the following:

- (D1) Unlike mathematical propositions, moral propositions are subject to widespread disagreement.
- (D2) Unlike mathematical propositions, there are no proofs as far as moral propositions are concerned.
- (D3) Unlike moral propositions, intuitions about mathematical propositions cannot be “reset” by experience.

Let us consider each of these in turn. Kaspar considers (D1), but argues that “there is mathematical disagreement” just as there is moral disagreement (p. 45). He gives the following example:

$$\frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{2} =$$

And then writes:

You might say the answer is obvious: $\frac{3}{4}$. If anything is self-evident, if there is any proposition on which we can all agree $\frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{2} = \frac{3}{4}$ would be it. But others disagree. Even if you give them time to think it through, they will claim that the answer is $\frac{1}{3}$. Ask any math teacher. Ask any university math teacher. There is a reason this is called a “common mistake” of adding fractions. So if mere disagreement is sufficient to demonstrate our ignorance concerning a certain subject matter, then we are ignorant that $\frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{2} = \frac{3}{4}$. Since we know this equation with certainty, and since our certainty about elementary mathematical propositions cannot exclude disagreement about them, that means that “If we have intuitive knowledge of self-evidence mathematical propositions, there ought to be no mathematical disagreement” is false. (p. 46)

I think that this is an example of *error*, not disagreement. First, it can be shown why $\frac{1}{3}$ is not the correct answer. Second, it can be demonstrated that $\frac{3}{4}$ is the correct answer. Finally, the error, or “common mistake,” can be diagnosed as a failure to make sure that the fractions have a common denominator before adding them up. Arguably, no such demonstrations and

diagnoses can be had as far as moral propositions are concerned, which leads me to (D2).

As mentioned above, intuitionists are committed to (I3), that is, the claim that the intuitive principles cannot be proved (p. 54). However, there are proofs in mathematics. On the face of it, then, it looks like moral knowledge and mathematical knowledge are not analogous in that respect. Intuitionists might try to account for this apparent dissimilarity by saying that the intuitive principles are analogous to axioms in mathematics. An axiom is a mathematical proposition that is taken to be self-evidently true but that cannot be proven. For example, one of the axioms of arithmetic is that addition is commutative. Hardly any mathematician doubts that addition is commutative even though it cannot be proven for all integers. Perhaps the intuitive principles are the axioms of ethics. The problem with this, however, is that there are legitimate doubts about the intuitive principles. Take, for example, "Harming others is wrong." What about harming others in self-defense? Is that wrong? What about harming others in war? Is that wrong? What about harming others to save the lives of many (e.g., torturing a suspect believed to have information about a dirty bomb that is about to explode in a densely populated area)? Is that wrong? Arguably, no such doubts arise as far as the axioms of arithmetic are concerned. This, then, brings us back to the issue of disagreement in (D1).

Regarding (D3), suppose that every time you take two apples and two more apples you end up with five apples. Suppose further that you do this several times. Would the fact that you have somehow ended up with five apples rather than four, as you might have expected, make you revise your intuitions about $2 + 2 = 4$? Arguably not; rather than think that $2 + 2 = 4$ is now false, and $2 + 2 = 5$ is now true, you would probably think that something goes wrong whenever you count the apples. In fact, any explanation for why you end up with five apples (e.g., someone is playing a trick on you) would be more likely than that $2 + 2$ now equals 5. But intuitionists want to claim that this sort of thing happens with moral intuitions. As Kaspar writes:

Witnessing two world wars, governments exterminating millions of their own people, justified instances of intentional civilian bombing, have *reset our intuitions*, making them in several ways more accurate. (p. 24, emphasis added)

Take Jones, a young woman raised as a moral nihilist by her parents. She believes that there is nothing wrong with harming others, and her intuitions accord with that belief. But then Jones witnesses someone being severely beaten. She thinks about it, continues to believe there is nothing wrong with what happened, but then she considers "It is wrong to harm others" [and] it seems to her to be true. (p. 64)

On the face of it, then, it looks like moral intuitions and mathematical intuitions are not analogous in that respect. The former can be “reset” by experience, whereas the latter cannot be “reset” by experience.

If this is correct, then given these dissimilarities between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge, namely, (D1)-(D3), I think that the analogy between the two needs to be reevaluated.

4. An Argument from the Epistemic Preferability of the Intuitive Principles

According to Kaspar, “Intuitionism holds that we recognize that lying is wrong, and that is our best reason not to lie” (p. 18). This is supposed to hold for any intuitive principle. As Kaspar writes, “any intuitive principle will be found to be epistemically preferable to the principle of utility” (or any other “supreme principle of morality,” such as Kantianism or Contractarianism) (p. 60). For example, as a reason not to lie, “Lying is wrong” is “epistemically preferable” to “Lying will not maximize good.” The way we find this out, according to Kaspar, is by *direct epistemic appraisal*. That is to say, when we compare an intuitive principle, such as “Lying is wrong” with what a supreme principle of morality dictates in an *actual moral situation*, such as “Lying will not maximize good,” we find that the former is epistemically preferable to the latter (p. 60).

As an argument for intuitionism, then, the argument from the epistemic preferability of the intuitive principles can be stated as follows:

- (1) If p is epistemically preferable to q , then we know that p .
- (2) The intuitive principles (e.g., “Lying is wrong,” “Keeping promises is required,” “Harming others is wrong”) are epistemically preferable to supreme principles of morality (e.g., Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Contractarianism).

Therefore,

- (3) We have moral knowledge in the form of intuitive principles (e.g., “Lying is wrong,” “Keeping promises is required,” “Harming others is wrong”) (i.e., [I1]).

The key to evaluating this argument, I think, is getting clear on what “epistemically preferable” means.

One reading of “epistemically preferable” is the following: p is epistemically preferable to q when p provides a stronger reason to do (or not do) A than q does. Suppose that I am considering harming a person. One reason not to do it is that harming others is wrong. Another reason is that acting in ways that bring about more bad consequences (pain) than good consequences (pleasure) is wrong. If intuitionism is true, then the former

provides a stronger reason to refrain from harming a person than the latter does. But is that really the case? Consider the following:

(P1) Harming others is wrong.

Therefore,

(C1) If I harm this person, I would be doing something wrong. (from P1)

Therefore,

(C2) I should not harm this person. (from C1)

Contrast the above argument with this one:

(P2) Producing less than maximal pleasure (versus pain) is wrong.

Therefore,

(C3) If I inflict pain on this person, I would be doing something wrong. (from P2)

Therefore,

(C4) I should not inflict pain on this person. (from C3)

These two arguments look very similar in structure. In both arguments, the intermediate conclusion necessarily follows from the first premise. That is, C1 follows necessarily from P1, and C3 follows necessarily from P2. Likewise, in both arguments, the final conclusion necessarily follows from the intermediate conclusion by assuming that one should not do what is morally wrong. That is, C2 follows necessarily from C1, and C4 follows necessarily from C3. If this is correct, then it is not clear to me that P1 provides a *stronger* reason to refrain from harming a person than P2 does.

Since Kaspar stresses that “epistemic appraisal does not provide *conclusive evidence* for a proposition” (p. 61, emphasis added), perhaps this is not an adequate reading of “epistemically preferable.” Another reading of “epistemically preferable,” then, is the following: *p* is epistemically preferable to *q* when *p* occurs to us first in thought before *q* does. In other words, *p* is epistemically preferable to *q* just in case *p* is prior to *q* in the order of thought but not necessarily in the order of justification. This reading is suggested by the distinction between epistemic confidence (or certainty) and psychological confidence (or certainty) (p. 61). If this is correct, then “Harming others is wrong” is epistemically preferable to “Maximizing pain is wrong” because it is the first reason that comes to mind when we think about harming someone.

The problem with this reading of “epistemically preferable,” however, is that the fact that one reason occurs to us prior to another may be due to factors that have nothing to do with the quality of that reason (i.e., with whether it is a good reason or not). “Biases, wishful thinking, hidden antipathies and affections” (p. 15), as well as other factors, may explain why one reason comes to mind prior to another. The good news, I think, is that empirical research can help us figure out when some reasons occur to us first because of biases. For example, Robert Nozick’s intuitive reaction to his own “experience machine” thought experiment is that he would not want to be plugged into the machine.⁵ Many philosophers, as well as non-philosophers, share this intuitive reaction. A recent study, however, suggests that people have this intuitive reaction to Nozick’s thought experiment not because they value reality over virtual experience, but because “people are averse to abandon the life they have been experiencing so far, regardless of whether such life is virtual or real.”⁶ Social scientists call this the “status quo bias.” Felipe De Brigard shows that the status quo bias explains why people intuitively react to the “experience machine” thought experiment the way they do by presenting subjects with a “reverse experience machine,” in which they are told that they are already plugged into the machine and now have the opportunity to be unplugged and go back to their real lives. In response to the “reverse experience machine” thought experiment, most subjects say that they would like to remain in the machine.⁷ This study suggests that what occurs to most people first upon considering the “experience machine” thought experiment is not some deep moral truth but a reflection of the status quo bias.

5. Conclusion

There is a lot more in Kaspar’s *Intuitionism* than I can discuss in this brief comment. Here I have considered only three arguments, which can be found in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of *Intuitionism*: an inference to the best explanation, an argument from the analogy between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge, and an argument from the epistemic preferability of the intuitive principles. I have pointed out what I take to be some potential problems with these arguments. I do not think that any of these problems amounts to a decisive objection against intuitionism. Rather, these comments are meant to be taken as an invitation to refine these arguments, not abandon them.⁸

⁵ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 44.

⁶ Felipe De Brigard, “If You Like It, Does It Matter If It’s Real?” *Philosophical Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2010), pp. 43-57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸ I am grateful to Irfan Khawaja for inviting me to participate in this symposium and to David Kaspar for discussions about his book.

