

Symposium:
David Kaspar's *Intuitionism*

*Intuitionism: A Précis*¹

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Intuitionism explains what is moral and what morality is. Moral intuitionism may most succinctly be defined as the view that (i) we intuitively know (ii) several fundamental moral truths (iii) which have plural grounds. *Intuitionism* is a synthesis of what I think are the best doctrines offered by intuitionists past and present, accompanied by some original claims of my own, most notably in the area of moral metaphysics. It may be considered a comprehensive outline of intuitionism, and I think may usefully be used to see where further work in moral theory is needed.

Explanation is the central task of moral theory. Explaining both what morality is (metaethics) and what is moral (normative ethics) is needed not only to satisfy our lack of understanding: Our central reason for doubting the objectivity of morality, I claim, is that we don't know how to explain what we believe about morality. This gives the task of moral explanation a special urgency.

Intuitionism has often been considered explanatorily impotent. I tackle this charge in Chapter 1, and identify the basics of what we ought to believe, such as "Lying is wrong" and "Keeping promises is required," two "intuitive principles." Intuitionism doesn't merely explain what we ought to believe, but also why we already hold these beliefs, and why they've been held for millennia. Objectivist ethicists of all stripes justify their principles and theories by their ability to justify the intuitive principles. Only intuitionists seem to recognize that it is the intuitive principles that carry the greatest moral epistemic weight.

The intuitive principles may be considered the foundations of morality. They are self-evidently true. Everything else in morality that needs to be discussed must be related to these two points. The crucial foundational

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

task of ethics is to determine what we know about morality. The supreme epistemic credibility of the intuitive principles such as “Murder is wrong” and “Rape is wrong” in the moral domain gives them a controlling role over all other aspects of moral inquiry.

Intuitionism holds that we know moral truths about moral facts in the world. Access to such truths, access to such facts, is not the product of any moral theory, not even of intuitionism. Since the moral truth is revealed by what we really think about morality, I invite the reader to take part in our moral inquiry. Being convinced of intuitionism requires more direct reflection on the content of morality than any other theory. Other theories, in contrast, begin with one theoretical construct or another, often in the form of a supreme principle of morality in normative ethics, or some factor external to morality, such as feelings or properties of the natural world in metaethics. We start with how moral matters appear to the reader. If readers do not directly engage with what they think to be moral, if anything other than moral content is the controlling element of their inquiry, then they cannot take on the intuitionist perspective, let alone see how it might be true.

To best understand intuitionism one must know its recent history, which is Chapter 2’s main topic. In the 1930s intuitionism was the dominant school of ethics. It faded from view with the rise of logical positivism, and only reemerged in the 1990s. Examining the most famous critiques of intuitionism reveals important commonalities. Often no intuitionist under critique is quoted, and often doctrines are attributed to intuitionists that are not held by any major twentieth-century intuitionist. Most importantly, however, is that the history of intuitionism is part of the positive case for it. For in a highly focused, highly competitive field of analytic ethics, there has been a general drift toward the intuitionist position, which recent history has borne out.

The controlling intuitionist consideration is, again, moral epistemology, the subject of Chapter 3. Why we should and why we do believe the intuitive principles is explained by the concept of self-evidence. Self-evidence is a property of propositions. A proposition p is self-evident if and only if p contains all of the evidence needed for one to be justified in believing that p .

Robert Audi’s two-condition account of self-evidence explains the connection between a believer and a self-evident proposition. A true proposition p is self-evident if (1) a subject S is justified in believing p in virtue of understanding it and (2) if S believes p on the basis of understanding it, then S knows it.¹ Understanding a self-evident proposition is how one grasps its evidence. I make the case that every normal adult knows what’s right (a first-order matter), even if they believe a second-order claim that excludes such a possibility.

¹ See Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 48-49.

The metaphysical challenges to intuitionism are large. Chapter 4 grapples with some of them. The general metaphysical concern about intuitionism is its nonnaturalism. Intuitionism has held that properties such as “good” and “right” are nonnatural. What is most distinctive of nonnatural properties is that they cannot be observed, as visual properties are, or known by scientific means. Nihilism has directly attacked intuitionism on this basis, although it agrees that intuitionism captures what we really think about morality. Naturalism holds that we can observe moral properties as we can other properties in nature. The supervenience problem for intuitionism demands an explanation for how nonnatural moral properties are connected to natural properties. These challenges I respond to in turn.

The grounds of our duties is the neglected topic in intuitionism. Chapter 5 begins to remedy that. Most writing, both by proponents and opponents, has focused on intuitionism’s moral epistemology and its foundational pluralism. However, intuitionists such as H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross include within their descriptions of duty reference to “moral kinds” and “moral relations.” Examples of a moral kind are “lie” and “promise.” An example of a moral relation is the relation Smith bears to Jones after he promises to repair her roof. The promise relation binds Smith to Jones as a promiser, and gives Jones a claim against Smith. Moral kinds, I hold, have necessary structures, including components that invariably are part of them. Smith only instantiates “promise” when all components are part of his act, and in doing so enters the promise relation to Jones.

Moral kinds are the main tools of moral explanation, I argue in Chapter 6. “Good” is not what explains “right,” nor does “right” explain “good.” In order to give moral explanations their greatest explanatory power, intuitionists must embrace the intrinsic moral good, a concept that both Prichard and Ross exclude. I consider their doing so their colossal blunder. A large part of the case I make for the intrinsic moral good draws from their own work. Explaining what is right has different levels. The mere fact that an act is a lie gives us a *prima facie* duty not to do it. Considering the internal structure of a moral kind allows us a deeper level of explanation. Considering the value statuses of the components of moral kinds, both singly and wholly, gives us fuller, more accurate explanations of why acts are right or wrong than any other theory. Moral facts are explained with this machinery. The supervenience problems that were discussed in Chapter 4 are settled.

Normative rivals to intuitionism have had an easy time of it. They have claimed that since they have action-guiding supreme principles, while intuitionism does not, they are superior normative theories. In Chapter 7, I examine four rivals to intuitionism, mainly by focusing on their supreme principles of morality. From a purely epistemic standpoint, none fares well. In actual moral situations, we are much more likely to think we know “Lying is wrong” than “Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will as a universal law.” Also, no supreme-principle theorist seems to be aware that just because a supreme principle S implies, say, three intuitive principles, P, Q, and R, and P, Q, and R are true, does *not* imply that S is true. For false

propositions like “All numbers are even” imply true propositions such as “Two is even,” “Four is even,” and so on. Despite fundamental epistemic and logical weaknesses, the supreme principles I discuss do have great practical value that we should not neglect. And insofar as any of them are self-evidently true, we ought to incorporate them into intuitionism, as Ross recommends for the principle of utility, and Audi does for Immanuel Kant’s principle of humanity.

In Chapter 8, the final chapter, I bring matters down to earth and then to the widest possible perspective. The recent intuitionist focus on metaethics has meant that the actual content of the intuitive principles has been overlooked. Here I acknowledge that different intuitionists hold different intuitive principles, and I suggest how we might determine which intuitive principles are the fundamental ones. On the matter of action-guidance, I argue that although several theories promise to provide it through their supreme principles, they don’t really deliver action-guidance in any meaningful sense.

Turning to larger issues, I confront the perennial moral question: Why should we do what’s right? I argue that, given that we *know* what’s fundamentally right, we have a clear reason to do what’s right. Lastly, I argue that the existence of God is not logically necessary for the existence of morality. If God exists, then of course God is part of the explanation of why there are moral properties. If God does not exist, then moral reality is not necessarily undone by this, although other aspects of the moral life will arguably be altered.

