Explaining Intuitionism

David Kaspar
St. John's University

1. Introduction

Intuitionism is an attempt at a comprehensive outline of moral intuitionism.[1] It provides the basics of the theory and shows that intuitionism has great, and largely untapped, potential for explanatory power. Reflecting on the comments and criticisms offered by Irfan Khawaja, Moti Mizrahi, and Matthew Pianalto has given me a much better understanding of my theory and its aims than when I wrote *Intuitionism*. The wide range of topics covered in their criticisms is such that responding to them provides me an opportunity both to explain what intuitionism is and to show that, indeed, intuitionism is quite capable of explaining morality.

Intuitionism is the theory that claims that *you know what's right*. We know that lying is wrong, murder is wrong, keeping promises is required, and so on. I call these "the intuitive principles," which is the set of principles that are most intuitively convincing and are really the possession of all moral theories. It has been claimed that the most vulnerable point of intuitionism is its epistemology. This is exactly backward. Intuitionism's epistemology is its strongest point. It is so strong, in fact, that no other theory comes close to it when comparing the epistemic credibility of their moral propositions against the intuitive principles.

Moral inquiry involves extensive reflection. All moral propositions must regularly be scrutinized. Which propositions survive the process most intact, have high epistemic credibility. The intuitive principles have very high epistemic credibility. Extensive reflection makes one aware of the persistence of certain moral propositions. This persistence must be explained. Say that you scrutinize (*l*) "Lying is wrong" repeatedly. You notice that it persists in seeming true to you, no matter how you take it apart, doubt it, question it. Call this phenomenon "intuitive persistence." The intuitive persistence of *l* is not confined to the mental lives of individual ethicists. It has been shared by humanity for ages. Intuitive persistence is to be differentiated from "doxastic persistence," where you continue to believe a proposition, whether or not it seems true to you. Clearly, however, with the intuitive principles both intuitive and doxastic persistence are in effect.

---

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

Despite all of my critics' criticisms, none has claimed that it is false that rape is wrong or that it is true that stealing is permitted—so they, too, seem to know what's right. What they disagree with, then, is intuitionism's theory, not its fundamental moral content. The question is: Can any alternative theory provide a better explanation for the intuitive and doxastic persistence of the moral thoughts we share?

2. Intuitionist Methodology

The major matters of ethics are decided by *what we really think* about morality. What we really think determines our initial inquiry in ethics, and also serves as the ultimate touchstone of what is correct. Moral intuitions, the intellectual appearances of moral content, or of content related to moral content in some way, are the materials of moral inquiry. W. D. Ross's brilliant phrase "what we really think" about morality,[2] if properly broken down, will enable us better to understand intuitionist methodology. Thought is how we determine what is right. "We" covers not only all ethicists, but all reflective humans. Lastly, not just any moral thought we have is to be considered plausible, solid, or true. Only what we *really* think after extensive reflection can determine which moral propositions have the utmost epistemic credibility.

This is all wrong, according to Irfan Khawaja. He states that, "'getting clear on what we really think' cannot be a discovery-procedure for accessing the mind-independent facts/truths described there."[3] Although doing so clarifies our thoughts, he claims, it is knowledge of our cognitive states, "not knowledge about facts that exist independently of those cognitive states."[4] "I think it begs the question to say that determining what we really think about a subject 'brings into focus what we really *know*': it merely brings into focus what we really *believe*."[5]

Reflection can lead to the discovery of substantive truths not inferred from other propositions, but Khawaja excludes the possibility *a priori*. In math, I believe, reflection can lead us to discover a new principle. In ethics, I hold, reflection can lead us to discover a new moral truth. In both disciplines we can start off doubting some proposition *p*, then come to believe it. Conversely, we can believe *p*, then come to doubt it. Intuitionism, as I view it, makes no *a priori* commitment to a certain set of moral propositions, not even the "common sense" ones. Rather, one can try as many ethical positions as one likes, but after even years of extensive reflection the moral propositions

---

[2] See, e.g., W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), *passim*.

[3] Irfan Khawaja, "David Kaspar's *Intuitionism*: A Foundationalist-Empiricist Response," *Reason Papers* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 14-15.

[4] Ibid., p. 15.

[5] Ibid., p. 21.

with the greatest epistemic credibility will continue to be the intuitive principles (p. 22).

Intuitionism invites readers to take up moral reflection anew. In the process of moral inquiry we find that our thoughts cannot roam freely in every direction and elicit from us uniform cognitive responses. We are not cognitively free, for example, really to think that rape is by its very nature permitted. Something restricts or limits our moral thoughts, and it does not seem merely to be our psychology. Ethics must explain why this is so. The first step in moral inquiry, however, is determining how the content of substantive moral propositions initially seems to us.

A number of psychological factors can skew what we think in ethics. A special hazard for ethicists is that a particular theoretical commitment can often interfere with our determining what we really think. As I say, "Since we are initially unsure which of our moral beliefs is true, or even which moral beliefs we really hold, we cannot make any assumptions about the ultimate results of our moral reflections" (p. 15). That is one reason why it is recommended that we first determine how intuitive principles seem to us. As I state, "Doubting whether we know a given proposition is almost always salutary *in philosophical inquiry*. But the important thing now is merely what seems correct to us. So doubts should be registered, then let go" (p. 16, emphasis added). Khawaja responds to this suggestion by claiming that this amounts to a "suppression of doubt" and that I am "stacking the deck."[6] Suppose that "Lying is wrong" seems true to me, but then I come to doubt it because of my previous philosophical commitments. My recommendation is that we initially give more attention to how moral propositions seem *in themselves* than to anything else.

3. Self-Evidence

Stealing seems to me to be wrong. The intuitionist explanation of why we are justified in believing it is that the stealing proposition is self-evident. However, most propositions in ethics are not self-evident. Almost only the intuitive principles are confidently claimed to be. This qualification is crucial, for, on my account, it is precisely because metaethical propositions and applied moral propositions are *not* self-evident that explains why disagreement about them is ongoing.

Khawaja doesn't think there's much to this idea. He flatly states, "None of the moral intuitions that Kaspar regards as self-evident truths is self-evident."[7] I agree with Khawaja unreservedly. None of the *intuitions* I discuss are self-evident. Intuitions are not the sort of entity that can be self-evidently true. The best account of the matter separates the tangle of entities involved in moral cognition into three parts: (1) Intuitions are intellectual appearances: the

---

[6] Ibid., pp. 22 and 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 15.

seeming true to me of a given proposition *p*. (2) The objects of such intuitions are propositions. Only propositions can be self-evidently true. (3) Our doxastic attitudes toward such propositions are influenced by how they seem to us. We can believe or disbelieve a proposition *p*, whether it is self-evident (p. 63).

The claim that no moral propositions are self-evident is something with which I would disagree. But what is self-evidence? Khawaja holds: "Intuitionists claim that moral intuitions qualify as knowledge because moral intuitions are self-evident truths, and when *S* understands a self-evident truth and affirms it, *S* has knowledge."[8] Robert Audi's two-condition account of self-evidence, with which I agree, is a little different from what Khawaja claims it is. A true proposition *p* is self-evident if (1) a subject *S*'s understanding *p* justifies *S* in believing it and (2) *S*'s believing *p on the basis* of understanding it suffices for *S* knowing it. What is distinctive about a self-evident proposition in itself is that it contains all of the evidence needed to be justified in believing it. This property helps us to see why understanding the self-evident proposition would confer justification on one's understanding. Merely understanding a proposition *q* and affirming *q* would not amount to knowledge of it. The world would be most different than it is if that were so.

If it is not propositions that are self-evident, what entities are? Khawaja says: "As a foundationalist, I agree that some things are self-evident. As an empiricist, however, my view is that what is self-evident (and the only thing that is) is the evidence of the senses on a direct-realist account of perception." Later he states, "[W]hat is self-evident is what is *transparently evident* to cognition, and the only thing that fits the bill is sensory perception."[9] The question is, then, can sensory perceptions even possibly be self-evident? I'll show that they cannot.

Divide propositions evident to us into two classes: the self-evident and the other-evident. A proposition is evident to me if and only if it appears true to me beyond all reasonable doubt. Take an obvious candidate for a self-evident proposition: $2 + 3 = 5$. It is self-evident, once more, because all of the evidence for this proposition is in the proposition. It is also the source of what makes it evident to us. Take an other-evident proposition: (*h*) I have a hand. The proposition *h* is evident to me. The proposition *h* is evident to me not because of *h* itself, but instead because of something other than the proposition *h*: namely, the sensory perception of my hand. The difference between these two categories of propositions is that one has the source of its evidence in itself, while the other has the source of its evidence in something else—here, a sensory perception.

What might self-evident sensory perceptions be like? We have an initial problem in saying, as on Khawaja's account, that sensory perceptions

---

[8] Ibid., p. 16.

[9] Ibid., p. 18.

must be the bearers of truth. It is self-evident truth we are speaking of, after all, when we talk about propositions being self-evident. It seems odd to say that a sensory perception is true. But let's try. Suppose that a sensory perception has the content "A red bird is flying," and that it provides the evidence for itself and thereby justifies it. We must say that the perception is true because of itself. This is an unattractive feature of the view, for how do we tell the self-evident perceptions from the ones that are not? Might a sensory perception of a bent stick in water, on this view, be true in itself, no matter the shape of the corresponding stick?

Khawaja could claim that some *sentences* are self-evident and that others are other-evident. Concerning the latter category, the sentence "A red bird is flying" could be made evident by the perception of a red bird flying. But what would it mean to say that some sentences are self-evident? Sentences are marks on paper, on the board, or utterances that we can aurally be aware of. It is difficult to see how mere marks or sounds could give evidence for themselves in any way. The problem with Khawaja's account of self-evidence is that it has no plausible truth-bearer.

4. *The* Intuitive Principles?

Since the revival of intuitionism in the 1990s, most of the focus has been on metaethics. This makes sense because most of the attacks against intuitionism have been metaethical. A lingering question about intuitionism, though, is: What list of intuitive principles is the correct one? As Khawaja asks, "[I]f moral intuitions are self-evident, and we all have knowledge of them, why is it so difficult to come up with a single uncontroversial case of one that guides action, even in the hands of intuitionists?"[10]

This is an important question, and one that should receive a greater share of attention as more and more of the building blocks of intuitionism are established. In order to grapple with the matter, I provide the lists of self-evident or evident principles of Ross, Robert Audi, Russ Shafer-Landau, and Michael Huemer in Chapter 8. I then propose ways we can figure out which principles are correct, based on the work done in the rest of the book. First, Shafer-Landau and Huemer don't attempt to provide a list of fundamental moral principles, just examples of self-evident or evident moral propositions. Ross's and Audi's lists of intuitive principles are more closely related. They are intended to be fundamental.

So as to address the different-lists concern, consider my favored way of stating the intuitive principles next to Audi's. Where Audi favors "should," I favor "right." Where he favors "should not," I favor "wrong." One item on Audi's list is: "We should not lie." Khawaja would be right to point out that I instead hold "Lying is wrong." There is that difference, but the difference is not that Audi disagrees that lying is wrong and I deny that we should not lie. I wholly agree that we should not lie. And Ross would disagree with both of us

---

[10] Ibid., p. 17.

in that he formulates his principle as: We have a duty not to lie. He would completely agree, though, that lying is wrong and that we should not lie. What we have is a theoretical disagreement. We disagree in our theories, so the term in question will be different. This disagreement is not like three zoologists spying an animal in the distance and, in their respective attempts to identify it, saying: "That animal is a tiger," "No, it is a giraffe," and "No, it's a hippopotamus." Which fundamental formulations are correct will be determined by which intuitionist theory is ultimately correct.

5. The Search for a Criterion

The search for a criterion of moral acts continues. Adherents of supreme-principle theories disagree about which criterion is correct. Does the principle of utility inform us of what is right? Or is it the Categorical Imperative? Despite over two hundred years of dispute, the matter remains unresolved. However, utilitarians and Kantians agree on one thing: The mere fact that intuitionists do not assume with them that a single principle is necessary and sufficient for determining what is right, that intuitionists are not single mindedly adhering to a single principle supposed supreme, come what may, alone shows that intuitionism is mistaken. Khawaja continues their tradition by arguing that an objection of A. J. Ayer's to intuitionism is much stronger than I think it is.

Khawaja states that Ayer makes "a request for a procedure to *resolve* disagreement. Ayer's point is that intuitionists lack such a procedure, and that lacking a procedure is a defect for the theory. I think that the objection is a good one."[11] One of the main aims of *Intuitionism* is to show how weak are the reasons for believing that there is a supreme principle of morality (p. 4). What I say against supreme principles, throughout the book, goes also for any moral criterion. One point is epistemic. Take "Lying is wrong" and "Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will as a universal law." Between these two propositions, which one is more convincing? Most will say that "Lying is wrong" has much greater epistemic credibility. In fact, part of Immanuel Kant's case for his supreme principle of morality is that the intuitive principles such as "Lying is wrong" are derived from it. So the intuitive principles are, so to speak, wearing the epistemic trousers in the attempted relationship between them and the Categorical Imperative. The same is true of any other supreme principle. Now we'll move on to disagreement. If degree of disagreement is a sign of epistemic weakness, then the much higher degree of disagreement about the utility principle indicates that it is epistemically much weaker than the lying principle. The same goes for any other supreme principle.

In order to assess Ayer's demand, it would be helpful for Khawaja to state why he believes that such a demand can possibly be met. I believe that it cannot, for requesting a criterion to resolve disagreements in itself has self-

---

[11] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

defeating complications. Suppose we say that you must have a criterion for resolving disagreements between two propositions, *p* and *q*. Suppose also that Jones proposes *C* as a criterion that will do the job. Smith, however, has a different idea. *D*, she claims, is what will really resolve the disagreement between *p* and *q*. If a request for a criterion is a good objection, as Khawaja claims, then it seems that one can request to know by what criterion we can decide which is correct: criterion *C* or criterion *D*. And we're off and regressing infinitely.

6. Epistemic Appraisal

Demonstrating the truth of self-evident intuitive principles comes with special challenges. Certainly, the ones we know and discuss are quite obvious, but the fundamental nature of such principles makes proof impossible. Consider the principle "Lying is wrong." There are white lies. There are grave lies. But there is no act of either kind which is more fundamental than being a "lie." It may be called a generic, or primitive, concept. There are minor wrongs. There are serious wrongs. But "wrongness" is fundamental. Therefore, there is no more fundamental, true, and informative proposition that can imply that "Lying is wrong." We all believe and know such intuitive principles, but their nature excludes proof of them.[12]

Intuitionism has one way to persuade doubters of the high epistemic credibility of the intuitive principles. It is through "epistemic appraisal." Epistemic appraisal is a direct comparison of two propositions in a given context. In the context of sense perception, the appraisal would be conducted with two propositions about some visible object. In the process of the comparison the agent would find in most cases one of the two propositions to be epistemically preferable—meaning, one proposition would be the one he *should* believe. He would *prima facie* be justified in believing it. For example, a person in a well-lit room with a table might be asked: Is that table brown? Or is that table green? If the agent was in doubt before, comparing the two color options should focus his thinking. This procedure of epistemic appraisal is widely found in philosophy. As I point out in *Intuitionism*, a careful reading of the early texts of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell reveals that their comparisons of common-sense propositions with the abstract theoretical propositions of the absolute idealists was key to their persuading others to abandon absolute idealism. H. A. Prichard and Ross use epistemic appraisal equally effectively against utilitarianism.

Moti Mizrahi casts doubt on the effectiveness of epistemic appraisal, but he does not claim that Moore and Russell were mistaken for using it. Nor does he say that a person in a well-lit room who determines that he is seeing a

---

[12] Although I disagreed with it at the time (pp. 54-55), I've come to see that Audi's claim that there is nothing *per se* about self-evident propositions that excludes their being proved is correct. However, I continue to hold that fundamental self-evident propositions cannot be proved because of their fundamentality.

brown table and not a green one should believe that he is really seeing a green one. It seems that his claim is that epistemic appraisal only falls flat where moral propositions are concerned. One interpretation Mizrahi provides of what I might mean by claiming one proposition to be epistemically preferable to another is based on the temporal order in which the thoughts occur to us. As he puts it: "p is epistemically preferable to q when p occurs to us first in thought before q does."[13] He then points out that simply because one thought occurs to us before another does not provide justification for the first. In order to bolster this point he draws on the empirically tested concept of "status quo bias" which explains why, in effect, what we're used to biases us toward it.

I agree with Mizrahi that the mere fact that a thought is first confers no justification on it, but what might have prompted this interpretation? It's quite possible that Mizrahi is working from the common idea that intuitionism is a theory favoring common-sense moral principles. In response, I believe that I've guarded against that way of seeing things from the beginning. As I state:

> Intuitionism is committed to moral reflection as much as any moral theory. It makes no prior commitment to any moral beliefs, not even the commonsense ones. However, the results of moral reflection on what we really think are often articles of common sense. But the explanation for this result is that people commonly believe 'Keeping promises is required' and 'Harming others is wrong' because these truths are self-evident, rather than intuitionists declaring that they are self-evident just because they are popularly believed. That means that one can reflect endlessly on what moral beliefs are true, and end up believing the intuitive principles. (p. 22)

Mizrahi's other interpretation of epistemic preferability is somewhat closer to the target. He states, "p is epistemically preferable to q when p provides a stronger reason to do (or not do) A than q does."[14] Moving from the epistemic matter of justification to the matter of reason for action, to me, moves too fast. I would alter Mizrahi's formulation to read, "p is epistemically preferable to q when we have a stronger reason to believe p than q." I believe I understand why Mizrahi would say that a proposition p gives a reason to act, since the self-evidence of the intuitive principles is in discussion. However, the formulation I've just given better meets the requirement of a general statement about epistemic preferability. Nonetheless, his "stronger reason'" interpretation of epistemic preferability is close enough.

---

[13] Moti Mizrahi, "Comment on David Kaspar's *Intuitionism*," *Reason Papers* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2015), p. 34.

[14] Ibid., p. 33.

In order to point out the problem with epistemic appraisal and the consequent problem for the intuitive principles, Mizrahi sets up an epistemic appraisal of his own. The first argument reflects the intuitionist position:

(P1) Harming others is wrong. (Intuitionism)

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

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

In contrast, the utilitarian would offer this:

(P2) Producing less than maximal pleasure is wrong. (Utilitarianism)

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

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

He goes on to state that it "is not clear to me that P1 provides a *stronger* reason to refrain from harming a person than P2 does."[15] Now we can see why what is at issue is really what we have a stronger reason to believe. Agents can readily understand and see that it is evident that harming others is wrong. Can they see that it is evident that producing less than maximal pleasure is wrong? I doubt it. Even if they do, consider C3. In order to avoid any moral connotations "cause" should be used rather than "inflict," which often suggests cruelty or brutality. A direct comparison of C3, "If I cause this person pain, I would be doing something wrong" with C1, "If I harm this person, I would be doing something wrong" seems only to show C1 to be epistemically stronger. For unless one imports the content of "harm" into one's understanding of "pain," pain is largely understood to be morally neutral. The common saying, "No pain, no gain," is not a moral warning, but an encouragement to embrace pain where it is necessary in order to produce good results. Also, C1 seems to be true on its own. In contrast, C3 uncoupled from P2 is not that convincing at all.

7. Explaining All of Morality
The theoretical framework of intuitionism is explanatorily powerful. It can explain why we are justified in believing fundamental moral propositions, but I don't believe a viable moral theory can stop with that. That's why I argue that intuitionism can explain what we *do*, in fact, believe, an issue that is widely overlooked by ethicists today. But even that doesn't

---

[15] Ibid., p. 34.

expand the explanatory net of a moral theory enough. I hold that the true moral theory will explain *everything* having to do with morality, either directly or indirectly, when coupled with the relevant disciplines. It is really only by widely expanding our explanatory nets that we can begin to see which moral theories are viable and which are not. I'm confident that intuitionism explains best all of the moral phenomena.

Many of the explanations I offer contribute to an inference to best explanation (IBE) argument for intuitionism, as Mizrahi claims. Certainly, though, for intuitionism to be shown to be the best, its explanations must usefully be compared with those of other theories. *Intuitionism* only initiates the first step for such a comparison to take place. Expanding the explanatory net of intuitionism only makes sense once the foundational basics are in place, a topic I've covered so far. In my introduction I offer a list of points that I think intuitionism better explains than any other theory. All of the items cover what people commonly believe. Some of the items might be surprising. Most surprising perhaps are items that help to explain beliefs that might be thought to be used *against* intuitionism, such as items (f), (i), and (l) in the list below. I think that the list overall shows the breadth and depth of intuitionism:

(a) You know what's right.

(b) Not everything is black and white.

(c) Sometimes, in extreme cases, it's morally permissible to lie, steal, etc.

(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 ethical 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. (p. 3)

Mizrahi's critique of the IBE argument that is embedded throughout my book raises an important question. When I say that intuitionism explains (a) through (l) better than any other moral theory does, in what sense do I mean "all"? "All" can either be used distributively (each one) or collectively (as a body). The best overall theory is not necessarily the best theory on every point. It would be remarkable if that were the case. For example, we all are aware that Newtonian mechanics is better suited to explaining macroscopic events than quantum mechanics is. However, it is not the better explanatory theory overall. Likewise, I don't think that anyone would doubt that utilitarianism can explain (e), the cold cost-benefit point, better than intuitionism does, for it is a more direct explanation, and intuitionism raises the prospect of a competing *prima facie* duty.

How do I employ IBE to make the case for intuitionism? Quite simply, I present the basics of intuitionism; then, when I've shown how it explains one of the points listed above, I make note of it. Mizrahi thinks that it is helpful to break my IBE approach down, item by item. He sets up the following argument:

(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) ("The intuitive principles are self-evident, synthetic a priori truths") is true.[16]

I wouldn't analyze my approach this way. If we're going to break things down, let's really break them down.

Given my approach of anchoring IBE in the foundations of morality, and given the points I've made above, what I would put in place of Mizrahi's reconstruction of this point is the following:

(1) (k) "Keeping promises is required" is evident to me.

(2) Because k is evident to me, I am inclined to believe it.

---

[16] Ibid., p. 28.

(3) The explanation for (*1*) is that the proposition *k* is self-evident.

(4) *K*'s being self-evident means that all of the evidence needed to be justified in believing that *k* is contained in *k*.

(5) My understanding *k* justifies me in believing that *k*.

(6) My believing *k* on the basis of understanding *k* means that I know that *k*.

(7) The best explanation for why I believe that I know that *k* is because *k* is self-evident.

Therefore, probably:

(8) The intuitive principle "Keeping promises is required" is self-evident.

Some comments are needed here. Claim (8) above is like Mizrahi's (I2). Intuitive principles are self-evident, synthetic *a priori* truths. The difference is I would only claim that *k* is self-evident at this point. It would be hasty to claim that it is synthetic or necessary on the basis of (1) through (8) alone. It would also be too much to claim just by extensively reflecting on *k* that *all* intuitive substantive moral principles are self-evident. We have to be more systematic and take one step at a time. Additionally, I know that the argument above is not air-tight. I'm aware that a patient philosopher would hold off on believing *k* just because she is merely inclined to believe it. The difference, in my view, between an intuitionist and a moral skeptic is this. A moral skeptic would get stuck at (2). She would notice that she keeps being inclined to believe *k* even though she has scrutinized it thoroughly. Instead of attempting to find an illuminating explanation for the intuitive persistence of *k*'s content, she would announce that *some other* philosopher must prove *to her* that *k*. Rather than waiting for someone else to take charge of the constructive philosophical work, the intuitionist takes the initiative and attempts to explain the intuitive persistence of *k*.

8. Morality and Mathematics

Intuitionism has a special—if easily and often misunderstood—relationship to math. Intuitionists compare the intuitive principles with mathematical truths for three reasons: (1) to indicate that it is *possible* that *a priori* moral truths capture moral realities, as *a priori* mathematical truths might capture mathematical realities; (2) to indicate that an inclination to believe mathematical propositions are self-evidently true recommends a similar belief for moral propositions; and (3) to show that opponents of intuitionism unjustifiably have one standard for math and a separate standard

for morality, despite the intuitive persistence of certain substantive moral truths. That is, they have a double standard that places morality in the worse position. There is no claim, suggestion, or hint by any intuitionist that morality is like mathematics in *all* respects.

Mizrahi takes me to task for my analogical use of mathematics on behalf of intuitionism. Unlike mathematical propositions, he states, moral propositions are subject to widespread disagreement, and moral intuitions can be "reset" by experience.[17] There is a commonplace saying that is used to criticize analogies: "That analogy breaks down at some point." That is true, and necessarily so. For *every* analogy breaks down at *some* point. Otherwise, it would not be analogy. Analogies essentially compare two distinct things, say, *a* and *b*. If *a* and *b* were identical, then they could not be involved in an argument from analogy. Analogies work first by establishing some properties the two distinct things *a* and *b* have in common, say, *F*, *G*, and *H*. Once these common properties are established, the inference is made to an additional property, say, *J*.

An argument from analogy is not deductive. That is, that *a* has the property *J* does *not necessarily* follow from the fact that both *a* and *b* have properties *F*, *G*, and *H* and *b* has *J*. Since all analogies necessarily break down at some point, what is crucial to consider are two things: first, the point of the analogy and, secondly, just where the analogy breaks down. The reader of the passages in Chapter 3, and elsewhere, in which I compare moral propositions with mathematical ones should consider whether I have adequately supported the three points stated above.

Mizrahi thinks I haven't. He claims that "[u]nlike mathematical propositions, moral propositions are subject to widespread disagreement."[18] It depends on what moral propositions we're discussing. Again, applied ethical propositions and metaethical propositions are widely disputed. Since they are not self-evident, however, intuitionism explains (and is not undermined by) that fact. There is no widespread disagreement about intuitive principles. As I point out, since even self-evident mathematical propositions are disputed, *even if* some intuitive principles were disputed, it would not show they are false. I use the "common mistake" of adding fractions to illustrate this. Mizrahi responds by stating that, "I think that this is an example of *error*, not disagreement," suggesting that error about math propositions indicates the possibility for correctness.[19] In contrast, he seems to suggest, moral propositions invite mere disagreement, with no possibility for correctness. Let's see. Suppose that a teenage boy tells his father he believes that rape is

---

[17] Ibid., p. 33.

[18] Ibid., p. 31.

[19] Ibid.

morally permissible. Should the father regard his son as being in error? Or is it simply a disagreement? I would say that the son is wrong.

Historical events have moved us to reset our moral intuitions. The twentieth century unleashed numerous challenges that have made us think differently about morality. After two world wars, multiple genocidal campaigns by governments, and justified civilian bombings, we can no longer be absolutists. Mizrahi thinks that this sets morality apart from mathematics, but I wonder. The advent of non-Euclidean geometry was a resetting of our mathematical intuitions. It occurred when there were unprecedented, incredible technological advances in transportation, communication, and manufacturing. This, I claim, was no coincidence. Even advances in higher mathematics take place within a wider framework of human endeavor and experience.

9. Intuitionism and Moral Experience

Intuitionism is a theory about the foundations of morality. It has an epistemology, a metaphysics, and a semantics. It is also a normative ethics without needing to add any elements. Although it is meant to cover and explain a wide range of things, it has inherent limitations. There are some moral phenomena that it doesn't explicitly address. Some of the concerns that Matthew Pianalto raises are, I think, addressed to such phenomena. He states, "Kaspar needs to pay more attention to the role of experience in our grasp of moral concepts and to the open-textured nature of the moral concepts that show up in many of his examples of self-evident moral propositions."[20] Intuitionism isn't primarily a theory of moral experience, but rather of moral knowledge. Nor is it a theory of how we learn what is right. Neither is it a theory of moral emotion. For each of these points, though, intuitionism, coupled with psychology, can be used to help explain such matters. Intuitionism is not a theory about how morality is actually situated in a given society. When coupled with history, social psychology, and economic principles, intuitionism can give some useful insights into how morality fits into society. In a much fuller account of morality, I would agree that much of what Pianalto says I should include should be included. Intuitionism proper, however, has a narrower focus.

10. Substantive Moral Truth

"Murder is wrong," I hold, is a substantive proposition. Many ethicists deny this. They claim that it is analytic, that it is a mere truism. I don't deny that our sense of the wrongness of murder, our association of "murder'" with "wrong" in our minds, partly comes from the society in which we are reared. How could it be otherwise? What I do deny, however, is that the sentence "Murder is wrong" is unambiguous. After conceding that it

---

[20] Matthew Pianalto, "Intuitions, Experience, and Moral Concepts: A Critique of Kaspar's *Intuitionism*," *Reason Papers* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2015), p. 36.

expresses an analytic proposition, I argue that it also expresses a synthetic proposition. That "Murder is wrong" expresses a synthetic proposition is grounded in the fact that murder by its very nature is wrong. What I call a "moral kind" is a universal that is the moral nature of numerous acts.

Pianalto states that the "basic stuff of moral thought must be the stuff which we take to be *obvious*, and any general claim that is obvious can be labeled a 'truism'."[21] I dispute this label for the fundamental moral truths. The term "truism," as it is often used in philosophy, indicates a proposition that has no information. The intuitive principles do. Might "Murder is wrong" *only* express an analytic truth? The proponent of this view is saying, in effect, that what makes murder wrong is a semantic property. If Jones murders Robinson, we would agree that it is wrong. I hold that it is the nature of the act that makes it wrong. Those who hold that "Murder is wrong" is only analytic claim that what makes Jones's murdering Robinson wrong is the sort of proposition we apply to the case. That murder is wrong simply because of a property of a semantic truth-bearer we express by a certain declarative sentence would not be among the most compelling claims offered by an ethicist.

11. Moral Kinds

Intuitionism introduces the theory of moral kinds. Moral kinds are complex universals. The moral kind "murder" is an example of one. Moral kinds have necessary components. These components may be understood as necessary instantiation conditions of the kind. One component of the kind "murder" is that the act is intentionally performed. If Wilson kills Johnson, but it is not intentionally done, then that alone is sufficient for "murder" to fail to be instantiated, with perhaps the moral kind "manslaughter" being instantiated.

Moral kinds are the key to moral explanation. What makes some actions right and others wrong? Some acts instantiate a moral kind that has the property "wrongness." Other acts instantiate a moral kind that has the property "rightness." Suppose that the moral kind K necessarily has the property "wrongness." Every instantiation of K by human action determines the act it is. How do we know what we ought to do in moral situations? We consider options and we recognize different moral kinds in our different options. That is often sufficient to justify one in deciding what to do. Recognizing that an act one is about to perform is of a kind K gives a reason not to do it. The explanatory power of moral kinds extends beyond that, though. With each component of a moral kind, we can determine its value status, whether it is good, bad, or indifferent. Then we can determine the value status of the whole act. Take "murder," and just two of its components, the victim's death and the agent's intention to cause it. Death is a bad state. By

---

[21] Ibid., p. 45.

murdering one brings about the death of the victim. Intentionally bringing about such a state makes the action much worse.

A priori knowledge is controversial. Hence, we must speak about it with care. The way Pianalto talks about *a priori* knowledge might suggest that the notion is more suspect than it is. He says that in my view the knowledge of the intuitive principles is "acquired *a priori*."[22] This suggests that humans *acquire* knowledge independently of experience, which would certainly be puzzling. I would rather say that the *acquisition* is within our experience, but the source of the evidence for our knowledge is independent of sense-experience-based information. He also uses language of gaining knowledge "through intellectual insight that transcends experience."[23] This, in a different way, suggests a power that is quite unusual. If we've witnessed someone lying, "lie" has been instantiated. We recognize this, but all of this takes place within our experience. That "lie" is a universal raises very challenging metaphysical and epistemological issues. However, I would reject a theory that claims or implies that we have other than normal powers, which we nonetheless employ in everyday scenarios.

Moral kinds have necessary components. When we understand a moral kind like *"lie,"* we implicitly understand their components, and can be quite adroit in determining whether someone actually lied or merely performed a speech-act that fell short of lying. We were never *taught* these essential conditions of lying, which may be described as the essential rules of moral kinds. This is an indication that our understanding of them is *a priori*. Put differently, we know more things about moral kinds than learning them through instruction or experience could have provided. Pianalto expresses his doubts: "Although young children do not take ethics courses *per se*, they do learn about promising and lying from their parents, their school teachers and Sunday school teachers, and more broadly in the 'school of life'."[24] This is one point at which we are discussing matters beyond the primary theoretical range of intuitionism. I would never deny that we were taught about what's right and wrong in broad outline in such ways. But I would deny that our *understanding* of the several essential rules of lying or promising was taught to us. If one asks lay people how they know such things, they would be unsure. I'm confident that they would be sure that they were not taught such things point-by-point by their parents.

Intuitionism, critics charge, assumes that the intuitive principles are luminous. All that is needed, it is imagined, is a mental glance of an intuitive principle and it is so luminous that it is evident to one immediately. Surely, that is a position that can be offered, but no major intuitionist in the twentieth

---

[22] Ibid., p. 37.

[23] Ibid., p. 39.

[24] Ibid., p. 40.

or twenty-first centuries holds it. Incorporating moral kinds into intuitionism invites a new luminosity objection. As Pianalto states, "Kaspar must claim that the moral concepts about which we have intuitive knowledge have a clear shape that can be grasped. His allusions to such things as 'the essential rules of promising' and the 'very nature' of murder indicate that Kaspar accepts an essentialist view of whatever the fundamental moral kinds are."[25]

Essentialism is crucial to intuitionism. Consider what Ross says about lying: "When we consider a particular act as a lie, or as the breaking of a promise, or as a gratuitous infliction of pain, we do not need to, and do not, fall back on a remembered general principle; we see the individual act to be *by its very nature* wrong."[26] I am certainly open to explaining moral essences in a different way. Right now, however, it seems to me promising to consider moral kinds as the moral essences. I'm not exactly sure why I *must* claim that moral kinds have a clear shape that can be grasped. The very fact that our knowledge of essential rules of moral kinds is implicit, and the sort of thing we must reflect on to grasp, suggests that their shape is not entirely clear to us. Yes, the core components of "theft," "lie," and "promise" are there for us with some clarity. However, there are often well-justified philosophical disputes about such concepts around their edges.

Pianalto claims that moral kinds face trouble for "borderline and contentious cases."[27] As already pointed out, applied moral propositions like "Abortion is permissible" and "Abortion is impermissible" invite dispute because they are not self-evident. In relation to moral kinds, this is partly due to it being unclear whether the kind "murder" applies to fetuses. All I claim is that reflection, discussion, and *a posteriori* evidence of what is a fetus is, are capable of shifting the debate in favor of one side.

Pianalto is unsatisfied with this way of understanding how moral kinds relate to contentious issues. He expects much more of moral kinds than that. He states:

> [I]t seems, however, that one could object that if we can't settle whether abortion is murder except by appealing to non-intuitive considerations, then we can't grasp the essential nature of the concept of murder intuitively either, since there is no *a priori* rule that settles whether it extends to the case of abortion.[28]

---

[25] Ibid., p. 41.

[26] W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 173 (emphasis added).

[27] Pianalto, "Intuitions, Experience, and Moral Concepts," p. 41.

[28] Ibid.

If I read him right, Pianalto is claiming that there cannot be a universal moral kind *K* and I cannot grasp *K* unless it has an *a priori* rule that settles to what it extends. It would certainly be a welcome feature of moral kinds if they came with rules for their application, but what concepts are so equipped? If we stipulate that for something to be a concept, it must contain its own rule of application so as to enable us to deal with the trickiest of cases, then that would mean we have no concepts at all.

Moral kinds are determinate. They have necessary structures that don't vary from case to case. In themselves they have, as I would say, a definite shape. But due to the nature of moral kinds, and due to our limited cognitive capacity, it would be incorrect to say that their shapes are clear to us. Responding to Pianalto, moral kinds, at least as we apply them, are "open-textured." There are some clear core cases in which their application is not reasonably contestable, but there are also cases in which people can legitimately disagree about whether they apply. A good example of this is "harm." My critics have raised questions about harming others. Some of these concerns have to do with conflicting obligations, such as when someone is harming another in self-defense.[29] The theory of *prima facie* duty helps explain why harming another in self-defense is permissible. Pianalto raises questions simply because we are unsure whether harm is legitimately being applied to a case. None claims, though, that it is false that harming others is wrong. Moral kinds being characterized as having determinate shape (in themselves) but sometimes also having unclear shape (to us) explains how we can go from ignorance that a practice is harmful to people, to knowing it with a high degree of confidence.

12. Objective Explanation

Stating the intuitive principles and removing errors of thought that might convince people that they are false are important aims of ethics, but they are not the only ones. Complete understanding is the ultimate aim. Prichard and Ross convincingly show that intuitive principles have epistemic credibility far higher than utilitarianism or egoism do. They carefully describe what is involved in our duties, including conflicts between them. At certain points, though, they unhelpfully limit the range of moral explanation. They kept their analysis largely within the bounds of moral consciousness and shy away from the epistemic explanations and speculative metaphysics that might round out the theory of intuitionism.[30]

Pianalto seems closer to Prichard and Ross than I do in this respect. There are several points at which his alternative analyses of morality seem to

---

[29] Ibid., p. 44; also see Mizrahi, "Comment on David Kaspar's *Intuitionism*," p. 32.

[30] To be fair to Prichard and Ross, epistemology and metaphysics today are much more sophisticated than in their day, with each discipline having a history of numerous conjectures, missteps, false starts, and successes to draw from.

say, "That's far enough. Reasons and justifications have run out." Pianalto holds that conventions, or our feelings, the "form of life" we occupy, or some combination of them might somehow explain moral phenomena. He states that "[o]ur actual moral experiences do not put us into contact with the essences of moral kinds, but rather and more simply with paradigms and prototypes of open-textured concepts with contestable boundaries."[31]

There are epistemic reasons for hesitancy about moral kinds. Such entities are highly speculative. As I've claimed, though, with the intuitive principles secure, we can venture forth as far as needed to explain their high epistemic credibility, to explain their intuitive persistence, and so on. At one point, Pianalto recognizes that the main reason I reject the conventionalist account of a social prohibition against murder is that it doesn't explain *why* there is such a prohibition.[32] I don't accept his alternative explanatory framework because it does not seem to illuminate the moral phenomena; it is not explanatorily strong; and it doesn't bear within it the promise of explanatory completeness. Some of these features may be seen at a single point, at which Pianalto has us consider this: "A child takes delight in slowly dismembering a live butterfly. Is this wrong? My immediate response is that it is because I think we should respect life."[33] I share his immediate response. It's at the explanatory level that I disagree. Conventions are such that some societies encourage destroying lives. Feelings are such that some, such as the child, feel that dismembering butterflies is a joy. Moving toward the ultimate entities of moral explanation is highly speculative, but it has some chance of explaining why there are objective rights and wrongs.

13. Conclusion

Intuitionism faces a unique set of opportunities and obstacles. Here is one major obstacle. Focusing on the propositions with the greatest epistemic credibility would seem a natural place at which to start a moral theory. According to today's received view, it's not. Although other branches of philosophy have abandoned the Cartesian project of finding a single supreme principle from which all information can be derived, many ethicists are unwilling to take that step. Supreme-principle theorists, moral skeptics, and others typically share this assumption:

> (A) If any person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be able to infer p from some other beliefs of S.[34]

---

[31] Pianalto, "Intuitions, Experience, and Moral Concepts," p. 46.

[32] Ibid., p. 38.

[33] Ibid., p. 44.

[34] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 74.

By their own lights, neither moral skeptics nor supreme-principle theorists are justified in believing (A). For they haven't supplied premises that even appear to have strong support for it. Intuitionism disagrees with both by stating that there are substantive moral propositions that are so evident, that the best explanation of this comes from their built-in evidence for themselves.

Not all of the challenges that these theories face are stated. I believe that the attraction of theories like utilitarianism or moral nihilism is that they are novel. Doing the right thing is often mundane. We are seldom congratulated for doing our duty. A theory like intuitionism that focuses solely on what is convincing to our moral consciousness, leaving all that is morally extraneous out, risks inheriting the perceived dullness of morality itself. If, on the other hand, you can create a theory that gives people the idea that they can do what is normally thought to be wrong, it makes moral inquiry thrilling. It remains to be seen whether intuitionists can persuade other ethicists to stay within the often unglamorous bounds of morality.

The opportunities for intuitionist research are wide open. This article has indicated a number of fronts upon which such research can be carried out. Here is one. The theory of moral kinds affords a number of distinct challenges: determining the essential components of each moral kind, determining the exact metaphysical status of moral kinds, and determining how we can know them. I've indicated some of the explanatory roles moral kinds have. The better the account of them, the better it will explain morality.[35]