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## Renewing Moral Intuitionism

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### Abstract

According to moral intuitionism, moral properties are objective, but our cognitions of them are not always based on premises. In this paper, I develop a novel version of moral intuitionism and argue that this new intuitionism is worthy of closer attention. The intuitionistic theory I propose, while inspired by the early twentieth-century intuitionism of W.D. Ross, avoids the alleged errors of his view. Furthermore, unlike Robert Audi's contemporary formulation of intuitionism, my theory has the resources to account for the non-inferential character of particular, as opposed to merely general, moral beliefs. I achieve this result by avoiding the appeal to self-evidence to explain the possibility of non-inferential moral knowledge.

### Keywords

Robert Audi, moral intuitionism, moral knowledge, prototypes, W.D. Ross, self-evidence

Moral intuitionism is primarily a metaethical theory about the character of moral knowledge, and, less centrally, the nature of moral properties, such as the property of being morally right or morally good. The leading idea of moral intuitionism is that it is possible for us to know some particular and general objective moral facts in a non-inferential fashion. In its classic formulations, moral intuitionism was the favored view of a number of significant British moral theorists in the first part of the twentieth century, including A.C. Ewing, G.E. Moore, H.A. Prichard, Henry Sidgwick, and importantly, W.D. Ross.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.C. Ewing, *The Morality of Punishment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1929), ch. VI; *idem*, *Ethics* (London: English Universities Press, 1953); G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, rev. edn, 1993); H.A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', *Mind* 21 (1912); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 7th edn, 1907); and W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1930]). Important eighteenth-century

Intuitionism fell out of favor by the 1950s, in large part because it then became unpopular to hold, as intuitionists did, that there are objective moral facts of which we can have genuine moral knowledge. Enthusiasm for objectivistic moral theories rebounded two decades later and remains strong today, whereas interest in intuitionism did not immediately increase in tandem.

While in many quarters intuitionism is still dismissed out of hand, elsewhere, intuitionism has been the subject of renewed interest. Philosophers such as Robert Audi and others<sup>2</sup> have recently paid intuitionism serious attention, developing updated versions of the view and arguing that moral intuitionism is more plausible than many suppose. Audi's work on the topic is especially notable; he has done much to show, correctly in my view, that dismissals of intuitionism commonly rest on misunderstandings. Despite these virtues, I worry that new intuitionistic views such as Audi's are being developed along the wrong lines. Specifically, it seems to me that Audi's conception of intuitionism lacks the resources to respect fully the epistemic ethical particularism—the view according to which judgments about particular moral facts can be non-inferentially justified—that is central to intuitionism generally. One of the aims of this paper is to suggest that, while intuitionism indeed merits closer attention, an alternative formulation of the intuitionistic idea is needed.

The plan for this paper is as follows. In sections 1 through 3, I clarify the intuitionistic position and show why the traditional complaints with intuitionism are misplaced. I then critically consider Audi's intuitionism in section 4, where I suggest that Audi's view is importantly incomplete. Section 5 begins to sketch a new and updated version of intuitionism that I believe offers a more promising account of moral thought. I achieve this result by avoiding the appeal to self-evidence to account for non-inferential moral knowledge. Drawing from recent work in the cognitive sciences on categorization and concepts, I develop the alternative notion of independent credibility to explain the possibility of non-inferential knowledge of both particular and general moral truths.

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intuitionists include Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, in *idem*, *Philosophical Works*, ed. W. Hamilton, vol. II (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 101-136; *idem*, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and many of the papers contained in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2002).

## 1. Moral Intuitionism: An Initial Characterization

As I shall understand it, intuitionism is a species of realism about morality. All moral realists—intuitionists included—hold (1) that moral claims are capable of truth or falsity, where the truth-makers for moral claims are facts involving instantiations of moral properties, (2) that facts involving moral properties obtain independently of us, insofar as they do not depend on our actual or hypothetical beliefs or attitudes, provided that the facts in question do not involve these beliefs or attitudes themselves,<sup>3</sup> and (3) that at least some moral facts do obtain. On a realist view, deliberately harming infants for fun, and for no other reason, would still be morally wrong even if I (or we) did not think so or hoped otherwise or enjoyed doing so, and even if no one had ever thought it wrong. For realists, there is a fact of the matter about the moral status of harming infants in said fashion, and the obtaining of this fact does not depend on our moral beliefs or attitudes about it.

This is not the time to offer a full defense of moral realism, since I would like to begin my discussion of moral intuitionism, but briefly, the main consideration in its favor is that it seems to be the only metaethical view able successfully to explain, without explaining away, central features of moral thought. Moral realism helps us to understand how moral arguments could be valid or invalid, since moral statements are capable of truth or falsity. Realism allows for the possibility of genuine moral error, moral disagreement, moral progress, moral doubt, moral knowledge, and other such notions that seem to require moral truth, objectively construed.

If moral rightness or goodness does not dissolve into the characters of our internal states, and if the truth-makers for moral claims are independent of us, then realism is under a special burden to explain our recognition of moral truths. How do we know, for example, that keeping one's promises is morally right and that lying is morally wrong? It is not the *skeptical* question in which I am interested, but rather a question concerning the character of this knowledge. Assuming that we have some moral knowledge and that some moral properties are instantiated, our knowledge of these facts calls for explanation. On this point, intuitionism is distinguished from other forms of moral realism by its contention that it is possible for us to become aware of some existing moral facts non-inferentially, in a way that is not mediated by

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful discussion of the mind-independence relation in moral realism, see David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 2; Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, pp. 2-4; and Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), ch. 1.

reasoning or proof. By ‘non-inferential’, intuitionists mean a belief that is not held on the basis of premises; the belief is not reached by consciously accessible inference. The inferences that are relevant here need not be explicit. The intuitionist also wishes to classify as inferential those beliefs held on the basis of implicit inferences, i.e., inferences that are not fully conscious, yet at the same time are also consciously accessible.

To illustrate this notion of implicit inference, consider the following example. A physicist observes a track in a bubble chamber and subsequently thinks, ‘There goes a proton’. Bubble chambers contain super-heated liquid hydrogen within magnetic fields. Were an atomic particle to move through the chamber, the idea is that the particle would ionize the hydrogen atoms. This ionization would cause boiling and the formation of bubbles. The density of the bubbles in the bubble-track is supposed to indicate the particle’s ionization ability, and the direction and curvature of the track offers further evidence of the particle’s trajectory, momentum, and charge. Let us suppose that the physicist in our example is highly experienced; she has become accustomed to working with this particular bubble chamber and concluding that protons are present upon observing tracks with a specific character in said chamber. In the light of her prior experience, she would not need to labor through an explicit reasoning process that first assumes the truth of electro-magnetic theory, the law of conservation of momentum, Coulomb attractions between particles, and so on, from which she then deduces that the particle responsible for the track had a certain charge and mass, a charge and mass characteristic of protons.

Despite the lack of explicit reasoning in this case, the physicist’s theoretical belief concerns unobservables, and for this reason it would be strange to call her scientific observation ‘non-inferential’. In the standard case, I submit that her scientific belief qualifies as inferential because it is still held on the basis of the aforementioned theoretical premises, even if she does not explicitly revisit the argument in full consciousness each and every time she confronts a bubble-track. Importantly, the inferences in question are readily accessible to her, and this is why we are not dealing with some sort of unconscious inference. If asked why she concluded that a proton passed through the chamber, we are supposing that she would be disposed to offer the relevant inference, citing the bubble density, curvature and direction of the track as evidence for a particle which is a proton, given certain theoretical assumptions about the nature of protons—such as their charge and mass—as the reasons for which she believed that a proton was present.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My notion of inferential belief as belief that is held on the basis of implicit or explicit inference is thus narrower than those accounts of inferentiality offered by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong,

Intuitionism, as I conceive of it, is not concerned with alleged inferences that are inaccessible to consciousness. The central idea of moral intuitionism is that, in ordinary moral practice, we often do not proceed via inference to arrive at moral beliefs. Rather, we sometimes reach credible moral beliefs without having reasoned to them, implicitly or explicitly, from prior premises.

There is room for disagreement among intuitionists about which moral facts are the objects of non-inferential moral knowledge. Moral facts vary in degrees of generality. Facts involving fundamental moral principles or the moral status of action-types, such as the action-type ‘breaking promises’, are relatively general, while facts involving the moral status of concrete cases or action tokens, such as what Smith did yesterday, are said to be particular.

That it is morally wrong, other things being equal, to harm another simply for fun, to punish those we know to be innocent, and to utter falsehoods to deceive others intentionally are facts that many intuitionists think can be seen to be true in their own rights, and not on the basis of some inference from additional evidence, evidence that cites, for example, the truth of some higher-order moral theory and empirical evidence. The central intuitionistic idea, at least for those who follow the lead of W.D. Ross, is that, in addition to the above sorts of general moral truths, some particular moral facts also need not be evidenced by anything beyond themselves. For intuitionists, beliefs in particular and general moral facts can be compelling independently of their inferential relations to other beliefs. You could, if you like, call these non-inferential beliefs ‘moral intuitions’, but I wish to avoid this way of putting things, and prefer instead the term ‘independently credible moral belief’.<sup>5</sup> The problem is that the term ‘intuition’ is easily associated with other notions that do not apply in this case, such as the notion of being *intuitive*, in the sense of being easily understood. Additionally, in its everyday usage, the term ‘intuition’ sometimes refers to a non-rational and generally unreliable reaction, one that is not subject to further critical evaluation. An intuition is also something that is thought to issue from some special faculty called ‘intuition’. To skirt further confusions, I shall restrict my use of the term ‘moral intuition’ so that I use it only when discussing intuitionism as it was developed by such other figures as Ross.

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*Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 9 and Nicholas Sturgeon, ‘Ethical Intuitionism and Ethical Naturalism’, in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 184–211.

<sup>5</sup> Brad Hooker occasionally uses this term when discussing intuitionism, but he does not employ it in the technical sense under development here. See his ‘Intuitions and Moral Theorizing’, in P. Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 161–83, at p. 165.

Given the different versions of moral realism, why suppose that moral intuitionism is preferable? For one thing, intuitionism respects many features of everyday moral practice. Indeed, to offer such an account has been one of intuitionism's primary goals. Intuitionists aim to give a coherent account of moral thought, one that respects actual practices as much as it is able, without undue revision. For instance, many of our particular moral beliefs seem not to be held via deduction against the background of some general moral theory and our general moral beliefs seem not to be quasi-theoretical hypotheses, held on the basis of premises about their explanatory powers or inferential relations, as other realists, such as the Cornell moral realists,<sup>6</sup> would have it. It can be argued that most ordinary moral inquirers do not have a specific moral principle in mind when they form their moral opinions, as philosophers' experience teaching Introduction to Ethics might indicate. One's belief that it would be morally wrong to torture a child to save the lives of a hundred, or that it would be morally right to lie to a criminal about the whereabouts of his next victim, sometimes have epistemic credibility independent of that of a higher-order moral principle. There is growing evidence from cognitive psychology that suggests that many of our moral judgments are not based upon any readily available moral principles, but are instead psychologically immediate.<sup>7</sup> Our ability to make moral discriminations often outstrips linguistically codified moral principles. Even if Kantian ethics were correct, an intuitionist wants to say that someone could still know or justifiably believe that lying is morally wrong without familiarity with the Categorical Imperative.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Cornell realists Richard Boyd, 'How to Be a Moral Realist', in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181-228; Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*; and Nicholas Sturgeon, 'Moral Explanations', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), pp. 49-78.

<sup>7</sup> See Joshua Greene *et al.*, 'An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment', *Science* 293 (2001), pp. 2105-108; Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, 'How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work?', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2002), pp. 517-23; Jonathan Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review* 108 (2001), pp. 814-34. Note that Greene and Haidt employ a notion of 'moral intuition' that moral intuitionists, as I have characterized them, would reject. For Greene and Haidt, a moral intuition is more like a socially-informed moral gut-reaction, and such intuitions do not represent judgments about an objective moral reality. Still, their empirical findings are important to showing that a significant aspect of our moral thinking seems not to be inferential.

<sup>8</sup> See Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Essay V, ch. ii.

## 2. Mitigating Objections to Intuitionism

Despite its initial attractions, it is supposed that, once fleshed out, moral intuitionism is untenable.<sup>9</sup> While intuitionists see themselves as offering the best explanation of everyday moral practice, opponents view intuitionism as the worst possible such account and find it hopelessly non-explanatory insofar as it fails to shed any light on the nature of moral practice and thought. In this section, I would like briefly to discuss how proponents of intuitionism should defend their position against such charges.

It is often objected that intuitionism has unacceptable metaphysical and epistemological commitments, in that it posits the existence of strange non-natural moral qualities, as well as a distinctive, and equally mysterious, faculty of moral perception to detect their instances. Others complain that those moral beliefs described as intuitions are unreflective, moral gut-reactions, and that these common-sense moral opinions are hardly deserving of the name ‘knowledge’. Additionally, it is thought that, according to intuitionism, we just see what is morally right or morally good; moral facts are to be both obvious and immediately evident to those who encounter them. On an intuitionistic view, it is further objected, moral beliefs are to be infallible, indefeasible, and indubitable. And since so-called moral intuitions cannot be inferred from other considerations, intuitionism seems not to allow for the critical appraisal of one’s moral commitments because one cannot say anything in favor of, or against, one’s moral belief, or so it is argued. Either you see it, or you don’t. This kind of result has led many to complain, as G.J. Warnock famously did, that to say we know moral truths by intuition is ‘not really an answer at all, but a confession of bewilderment got up to look like an answer’.<sup>10</sup>

Recent defenders of intuitionism have pointed out that these objections need not affect contemporary forms of intuitionism, and to a degree, they do not afflict the classic developments of the view either.<sup>11</sup> The charge that intuitionism requires some strange philosophy of mind, according to which we have a dedicated faculty of intuition, is unfounded. To my knowledge,

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<sup>9</sup> For a representative illustration of the objections to intuitionism discussed below, see Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 183–202; W.D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 100–105; J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 38–42; P.H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 36–47; and G.J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1967), pp. 4–17.

<sup>10</sup> Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Audi, ‘Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics’ and his *The Good in the Right*.

none of the classic intuitionists, Ross or other, held such a view, nor do their views require it. In reply to the objection that intuitionism requires moral qualities to be non-natural, it can be argued, and I have argued it elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> that once the notion of naturalness is sufficiently clarified, there need be nothing objectionably non-natural about moral properties as conceived by intuitionists.

Moreover, even if an intuitionist supposes, as did Ross and Moore, that some moral facts are self-evident, it does not follow that such facts are obvious, or that our beliefs about them be indubitable or infallible. Nothing about the notion of self-evidence per se, or its successor notion in my work, ‘independent credibility’, requires that these beliefs lie outside the reach of reasonable doubt or error.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, while these truths are often in no need of proof, since they can be seen to be true in their own rights and not on the basis of premises, it does not follow from this that they are incapable of proof.<sup>14</sup> Just because  $p$  can be seen to be true in itself, this does not preclude  $p$  from being evident to us on other, inferential grounds. This result allows the intuitionist to avoid the objection that moral inquirers cannot say anything in favor of their moral beliefs about right and wrong or engage in rational disputes over the truth of these matters. For claims about these moral facts are inferable from, and stand in inferential relations with, other claims. While an intuitionist can admit that the objects of our non-inferential knowledge could have been inferred from other considerations, what is distinctive about intuitionism is the claim that, first, they need not be so inferred, and second, that we ordinarily do not reach these beliefs via inference.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, what about Warnock’s charge that intuitionism sheds no light on the issues, and stubbornly refuses to answer questions about the nature of moral thought and how we gain moral knowledge? Intuitionists claim that some credible moral beliefs are not held on the basis of premises or extraneous evidence. Yet, if these beliefs are not the result of inference, how do they arise so that they can count as knowledge? Ross, I think, believed that the self-evidence of the moral truths helped to answer this question. In the next section, I would like to consider carefully Ross’s remarks on this matter. This reading of Ross will put us in a position to appreciate the shortcomings of Robert Audi’s contemporary Ross-inspired intuitionism.

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Tropman, ‘Naturalism and the New Moral Intuitionism,’ *Journal of Philosophical Research* 33 (2008), pp. 163–84.

<sup>13</sup> See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, pp. 30–32.

<sup>14</sup> See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, pp. 52–54.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar view, see Ewing, *The Morality of Punishment*, p. 186.

### 3. The Intuitionism of W.D. Ross

Moral intuitionists are often ethical pluralists, and Ross was no exception. Key aspects of Ross's metaethics cannot be understood fully apart from his commitment to pluralism, so a few remarks about his normative ethics are in order. Ross thought that there exists a multiplicity of moral obligations that are at once irreducible and are not organized in a linear hierarchy. It is well known that Ross offered a preliminary list of these obligations that includes the duties of fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence.<sup>16</sup> To resolve potential conflicts among duties, Ross distinguished *prima facie* moral duties from final or overall duties. Suppose that you can save a child in need, but only by breaking a promise to meet a friend for lunch. Saving the child is *prima facie* right—and by 'right' Ross meant required—in virtue of its being in accord with the duty of beneficence, but it is also *prima facie* wrong in this case since breaking the promise violates one's duty of fidelity. A final duty is determined by all of an act's features. In light of all aspects of the situation, it might turn out that you are finally obliged to save the child and to break your promise, all things considered. Even though the action is *prima facie* wrong, it is finally morally right.

For Ross, some particular and general facts involving *prima facie* moral qualities are self-evident, and their self-evidence is supposed to account for how it is that these moral facts could be non-inferentially known. Matters surrounding Ross's account of our knowledge of final duties are more complicated, so I shall put off discussion of this issue for a few moments. Of the *prima facie* moral duties, Ross wrote,

That an act, *qua* fulfilling a promise, or *qua* effecting a just distribution of good . . . is *prima facie* right, is self-evident; not in the sense that it is evident from the beginning of our lives, or as soon as we attend to the proposition for the first time, but in the sense that when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself. It is self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident.<sup>17</sup>

Ross tells us that a self-evident truth is evident in its own right; its evidence does not require anything beyond what is contained in the truth itself. This would rule out the need to infer the moral truth from other truths. Ross did

<sup>16</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

not say a great deal more about the notion of self-evidence,<sup>18</sup> but the basic idea seems to be this. Suppose that one witnesses Smith, who intends to deceive Jones, utter an untrue remark to Jones deliberately. This action is of a certain type; it falls under the category ‘is a lie’. That Smith’s action has this feature of being a lie represents the ground of its *prima facie* moral wrongness. By reflecting carefully upon this action’s morally relevant features alone, Ross thought that a sufficiently mature individual can see, simply in virtue of its being a lie, that Smith’s action is *prima facie* wrong.

According to Ross, the *general* principles of *prima facie* duties are also self-evidently true, but they are only evident to us once we have grasped sufficiently many self-evident *particular* moral truths. Ross claimed that we gain such general moral knowledge through a non-inferential procedure called ‘intuitive induction’,<sup>19</sup> a notion borrowed from Aristotle. The general principles of *prima facie* duties, Ross said,

come to be self-evident to us just as mathematical axioms do. We find by experience that this couple of matches and that couple make four matches, that this couple of balls on a wire and that couple make four balls: and by reflection on these and similar discoveries we come to see that it is of the nature of two and two to make four. In a precisely similar way, we see the *prima facie* rightness of an act which would be the fulfillment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the fulfillment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend *prima facie* rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfillment of promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident *prima facie* rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of *prima facie* duty.<sup>20</sup>

Our cognitions of general *prima facie* moral truths depend upon our appreciation of individual instances of the *prima facie*, but the dependence is not inferential. As Ross conceived it, the particular cases of *prima facie* rightness do not constitute demonstrative evidence for the general claim. Our confidence that it is *prima facie* right to keep a promise does not rest simply on the number of times in which promise-fulfillment has this feature. This is why the induction is intuitive and not enumerative. Intuitive induction is

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<sup>18</sup> This is not true of the eighteenth-century intuitionist Thomas Reid, who had a more developed notion of self-evidence. See his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Essay III, Part iii, chs. ii–viii, and Essay V, chs. i–ii; and his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in T. Reid, *Philosophical Works*, ed. W. Hamilton, vol. I (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1967), Essay VI, ch. iv.

<sup>19</sup> W.D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 170.

<sup>20</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 32–33.

not, properly speaking, induction at all, since it is not an argument. This process is not supposed to be logical, yet it is not merely psychological either, since it results in knowledge.<sup>21</sup> The general force of such *prima facie* moral duties is first revealed to us in the individual cases. Moreover, once we recognize the truth of this general principle, Ross claimed that we do not then need to infer particular claims from it. We can see that the particular claim is true in its own right, not on the basis of appealing to a general principle beforehand.<sup>22</sup>

According to Ross, there are no general principles ranking the relative stringency of different moral obligations.<sup>23</sup> We do not reach credible beliefs about our final, all-things-considered duties by inferring them from general priority rules, since no such rules are available. Yet for Ross, facts involving our overall, as opposed to *prima facie*, moral duties are never self-evident.<sup>24</sup> Rather, when I find myself under competing *prima facie* duties, Ross said that we must study the situation carefully.<sup>25</sup> Often, it is not difficult for us to see what is overall morally right or wrong. When one is under a single *prima facie* moral duty or when one applicable moral obligation is much more stringent than its competitors, Ross claimed that it is possible to recognize the final moral qualities immediately and with little, if any, doubt.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that there are times at which knowledge of our overall moral duties could be non-inferential.<sup>27</sup> Yet, when the final moral feature of an action is not obvious to us, the task of ‘thinking out what it is that we [finally] ought to do’<sup>28</sup> becomes more complicated and can be the subject of much uncertainty. Ross noted that a fair amount of reasoning is sometimes necessary to resolve competing moral considerations in harder cases, and furthermore, that we are often unsure that our final moral judgment is indeed correct.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> When discussing intuitive induction in Aristotle’s work, Ross wrote, ‘The induction here is not proof of the principle, but the psychological preparation upon which the knowledge of the principle supervenes. The knowledge of the principle is not produced by reasoning but achieved by direct insight’ (Introduction to *Aristotle’s Prior and Posterior Analytics* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949], pp. 1–95, at p. 49).

<sup>22</sup> See Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> See Ross, ‘The Basis of Objective Judgments in Ethics’, *International Journal of Ethics* 37 (1927), pp. 113–27, at pp. 122–127; *idem*, *The Right and the Good*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 191.

<sup>27</sup> See also Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 186; *idem*, *The Right and the Good*, p. 31; *idem*, ‘The Basis of Objective Judgments in Ethics’, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 30–31.

Let us consider again Warnock's charge that intuitionism sheds no light on the nature of non-inferential moral knowledge. Ross's appeal to moral self-evidence only goes so far towards mollifying this concern; more needs to be said about what it means for a truth to be self-evident in Ross's sense. What is it about self-evident moral truths, for example, that might allow us to know them independently of inference? One of the problems is that, in Ross's work we do not find a developed theory of self-evidence, especially one that would be acceptable to contemporary epistemologists.<sup>30</sup> Labeling moral truths 'self-evident' is as of yet only a start to an answer to Warnock's objection. In this respect, a renewed Rossian intuitionism should either supplement or replace the details of Ross's appeal to self-evidence. Still, there are other elements of his view that an updated intuitionistic theory can retain. Contemporary intuitionists are Rossian insofar as they hold the metaethical claim that some general and particular moral beliefs have an independent epistemic credibility. Rossian intuitionists also embrace the outlines of Ross's ethical pluralism and seek to do justice to the sense in which we often are under competing and irreducible moral duties.

Robert Audi is currently the leading new-style intuitionist, and he is a self-professed Rossian.<sup>31</sup> He has devoted a great deal of time to resuscitating Ross's intuitionism, though along lines different than mine. Audi retains the appeal to self-evidence in his theory, yet he formulates it so as to avoid some of the objections discussed in the prior section, such as the objection that self-evident beliefs must be certain or obvious, while also providing a more detailed account of what it means for a proposition to be self-evident. I now turn to a critical consideration of Audi's ideas, with special emphasis on his account of self-evidence. We shall find that Audi's treatment of self-evidence is insufficient to the task of fully renewing a Rossian intuitionism.

#### 4. Self-Evidence in Audi's Intuitionism

According to Audi, a proposition is self-evident just in case it is a truth such that an *adequate* understanding of it satisfies the following conditions.

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<sup>30</sup> Ross thought, incorrectly, that self-evident truths are impossible to prove and that our knowledge of them is certain, in the sense of being free from doubt. See his *The Right and the Good*, pp. 30-31, 147.

<sup>31</sup> See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, and his 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics'.

- (a) In virtue of having that understanding, one is justified in believing the proposition (i.e., has justification for believing it, whether one in fact believes it or not); and
- (b) if one believes the proposition on the *basis* of that understanding of it, then one knows it.<sup>32</sup>

As Audi conceives it, self-evidence attaches to those propositions one can justifiably believe on the basis of adequately understanding them alone.<sup>33</sup> Consider the proposition, which Audi seems to consider self-evident, 'It is *prima facie* wrong to pay people unequally for equal work.'<sup>34</sup> By Audi's lights, if one has an adequate grasp of this proposition, one can know it to be true, provided that one believes it on the basis of this understanding. If one sufficiently understands what it means to do equal work, and so forth, and adequately grasps the proposition, according to condition (a) of Audi's analysis, this alone is all one needs to be justified in believing it. And if, following condition (b), you believe that it is *prima facie* wrong to pay people unequally for equal work on a basis of this understanding, then you know it to be true. Because self-evident moral propositions are such that we can know them to be true in virtue of grasping them adequately, and not the basis of anything beyond a grasp of the proposition itself, Audi claims that such moral knowledge is non-inferential.

My principal concern with Audi's analysis is that only wholly conceptual propositions are candidates for self-evidence. Audi has claimed that intuitive moral knowledge involves 'above all reflection on the concepts figuring in, and on the necessary implications of, the moral or other propositions whose status is supposed to be knowable through intuition'.<sup>35</sup> While Audi's picture of self-evidence might reveal how *general* moral truths, such as Ross's principles of *prima facie* duty, are evident to us in themselves, this account does not make obvious room for the self-evidence of *particular* moral truths, such as those moral truths about particular cases.

Consider my belief that what Smith just did was *prima facie* wrong. The object of this belief cannot be self-evident according to Audi. The proposition, 'What Smith just did was *prima facie* wrong', cannot be known *solely* on the basis of understanding words' conceptual meanings. It is clear that my grasp of the proposition could not suffice for my knowing it to be true. Note that it

<sup>32</sup> Robert Audi, 'Self-Evidence', *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), pp. 205–227, at p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> It is strange to speak of *understanding propositions*. Propositions are non-linguistic structures. We understand sentences, not propositions. Understanding sentences may indeed involve grasping, but not understanding, the propositions they express.

<sup>34</sup> Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', pp. 118–19.

would not help if we were to amend the proposition to include reference to the action's morally relevant features. The proposition, 'What Smith just did, i.e., tell a lie, was *prima facie* wrong', also does not qualify as self-evidently true on Audi's account. An adequate conceptual grasp of this amended proposition is not, in itself, all one would need to be justified in believing it. At minimum, one must know what it was that Smith *did* before one could be justified in believing that it was a lie, let alone be justified in believing that it was *prima facie* or even finally wrong. Audi's account has this consequence because knowledge of self-evident truths is a purely conceptual matter. The wrongness of Smith's act could not be self-evident since no non-trivial conception of Smith's act enters into the proposition, 'Smith's action was wrong'. We cannot learn substantive moral facts about the action in question solely by reflecting on the conceptual meaning of 'Smith's action'. Audi's analysis of self-evidence does not make room for a real-world knowledge of particular moral duties that is non-inferential.

Audi admits that his view rules out the self-evidence of particular moral truths.<sup>36</sup> In his more recent work, Audi stresses that intuitionists only claim self-evidence for the general principles of *prima facie* duty.<sup>37</sup> I think that this result removes something extremely important from intuitionism, and may even jettison some of the point of calling his metaethical theory 'intuitionistic', at least in a Rossian sense. Ross himself seemed to hold that truths about our *prima facie* duties in concrete situations could be self-evident. When describing intuitive induction, Ross wrote, 'What comes first in time is the apprehension of *the self-evident prima facie rightness of an individual act* of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of *prima facie* duty.'<sup>38</sup> Recognizing that a concrete action of a particular type is *prima facie* right is supposed to come before our grasp of the relevant moral generality, and the self-evidence of such particular facts appears to explain our non-inferential cognitions of them. Since Ross did not provide a detailed theory of self-evidence, it is possible that, by 'self-evident', Ross simply had in mind 'evident-in-itself and not on the basis of extraneous evidence', as opposed to Audi's more robust notion of 'could be known on the basis of an adequate understanding of the sentence's conceptual meaning'.

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<sup>36</sup> Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 69; 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Audi, *The Good in the Right*, pp. 55, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 33, my emphasis.

It is important to stress that, according to a Rossian intuitionism, cognitions of particular moral facts are afforded special epistemic status. This kind of particularism holds that some moral beliefs about particular cases are credible independently of their inferential relations to general moral principles. Part of the motivation of a Ross-style intuitionism is to capture our ability to make spontaneous—in the sense of being psychologically immediate and non-inferred—particular moral judgments. We must say something plausible about the credibility of these judgments concerning concrete instances of *prima facie*, and perhaps even some final, moral duties if we deny, as Rossian intuitionists do, that this credibility is always a matter of standing in the right sorts of inferential relations to a moral principle. Audi's appeal to self-evidence will not help us secure this particularistic element of Ross's intuitionism.

As far as I can tell, the only occasion on which Audi discusses intuitions about particular cases in any detail is when he distinguishes something he calls a 'conclusion of reflection' from a conclusion of inference.<sup>39</sup> There, Audi states that an intuition may be a conclusion of reflection if it non-inferentially results from thinking about an object holistically and in a way that does not rely on evidential premises. Audi tries to illuminate these two categories by way of examples. He claims that, upon reading a letter of recommendation that is labeled 'strong', one might *infer* that it is actually weak from evidential premises, such as the fact that the recommender never directly praises the applicant but instead only refers to the praise of others.<sup>40</sup> Since this judgment was inferred from evidence, it is what Audi calls a 'conclusion of inference'. Alternatively, in an example of a conclusion of reflection,

the letter could exhibit a subtler evasion of commitment: a labored description of progress from poor to good performance, an excess of points that balance the praise, an indirectness about the high commendation. One might then simply feel an element of reservation. In this second case, one might judge by a global, intuitive sense of the integration of vocabulary, detail, and tone.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike conclusions of inference, conclusions of *reflection* are supposed to be non-inferential. These conclusions are to result non-inferentially from reflecting upon the overall nature of some object. Strictly speaking, it is misleading to refer to such allegedly non-inferential judgments as 'conclusions', since they are not supposed to be conclusions of any argument held by the judging subject.

<sup>39</sup> See Audi, *The Good in the Right*, pp. 45–48.

<sup>40</sup> Audi, *The Good in the Right*, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

I am not sure that conclusions of reflection represent an appropriate model for understanding the non-inferentiality of beliefs about particular *prima facie* duties. Conclusions of reflection are to emerge from broadly considering and characterizing their objects in some way. Yet, unlike final moral duties, an action's *prima facie* moral quality depends on just one of its aspects, irrespective of its other features. We need not consider all of the action's features in order to grasp one of its *prima facie* moral characteristics. Knowledge of instances of *prima facie* moral properties does not involve considering the object as a whole or reflecting upon its nature in the broad way Audi describes. For this reason, I do not think that Audi's conclusions of reflection will help us explain our non-inferential knowledge of concrete *prima facie* duties.

Though he does not introduce conclusions of reflection specifically in connection with non-inferential cognitions of our *final* moral duties, these kinds of reflective beliefs do seem closer to Ross's idea of our non-inferential beliefs about final moral qualities than our beliefs in *prima facie* ones. Yet, Audi sometimes claims that our beliefs about final duties are typically *inferential*.<sup>42</sup> In short, it is not clear to me exactly what role conclusions of reflection are to play in Audi's formulation of intuitionism.

Even if we were to set aside these reservations and supplement moral self-evidence with these so-called 'conclusions of reflection', I am doubtful that this would help the Rossian intuitionist make much headway against Warnock's charge that an intuitionistic moral epistemology is objectionably non-explanatory. To say that a belief is a conclusion of reflection seems no more illuminating than simply labeling the belief a moral intuition. Moreover, Audi has recently indicated that there is a third species of intuitive moral knowledge: moral beliefs that neither concern self-evident truths nor are arrived at reflectively.<sup>43</sup> Some non-self-evident moral beliefs are not conclusions of reflections, says Audi, since they concern facts that are so obvious so as not to require reflection. While these moral cognitions also qualify as non-inferential for Audi, he does not elaborate further. More needs to be said about both conclusions and reflection, and this third class of non-inferential moral belief, if Audi is to remove the mystery surrounding non-inferential moral cognition. Furthermore, going this route to explain non-inferential moral knowledge has the unfortunate consequence that there would now be three disparate and apparently unconnected classes of intuitive knowledge. While

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<sup>42</sup> Audi, *The Good in the Right*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>43</sup> R. Audi, 'Intuition, Reflection, and Justification', in M. Timmons, J. Greco and A. Mele (eds.), *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 201–221, at p. 204.

some so-called ‘intuitions’ result from grasping the meanings of self-evident moral statements, others are to be the products of considering cases in a reflective, holistic manner, and still others might be non-reflectively, but non-inferentially, justified. One might have hoped for a more unified picture of non-inferential knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Independently Credible Moral Beliefs

There is a more promising route available to the renewed Rossian intuitionist for easing concerns about the possibility and character of non-inferential knowledge. Current work in the cognitive sciences indicates that we in fact *have* a capacity for non-inferential knowledge, a capacity that is neither strange nor mysterious. I would now like to sketch a psychological picture of the structure of human concepts and concept-application that is gaining popularity and to show how this picture might demystify the intuitionist’s assertion that some moral beliefs can be independently credible. It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate fully that this psychological theory is in fact correct. I merely point to it as a possible and plausible explanation of our capacity for non-inferential moral knowledge. What follows is a psychological-cognitive story about why these beliefs are non-inferential. I am separating this question from the issue of these beliefs’ epistemic status as knowledge or justified belief. I intend the following psychological account of these beliefs to be consistent with a correct view about the conditions for knowledge or epistemic justification more generally. While the only theory of epistemic justification that this story obviously precludes is one according to which all justification is inferential, there are independent reasons to reject such an account.

Many psychologists agree that it is in virtue of our having a *concept* of a category or property that we are able to judge something to be an instance of it. It is reasonable to suppose that the basic cognitive machinery we use to make classification-judgments in general should also underwrite our moral classifications.<sup>45</sup> According to the older, and no longer popular, classical view, categories have necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for membership, and having a concept of a category involves knowing what these conditions are.

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<sup>44</sup> Shafer-Landau’s intuitionistic theory, which also retains the appeal to moral self-evidence, has a similar result. See his *Moral Realism*, pp. 278–80.

<sup>45</sup> For a similar claim about moral cognition, see Paul Churchland, ‘The Neural Representation of the Social World’, in L. May, M. Friedman and A. Clark (eds.), *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 91–108, at p. 92.

On this view, our concept of triangle, for example, would be given by the knowledge that triangles are three-sided planar figures. Classifying an item as an instance of a category or property is then a matter of determining if the item satisfies the conditions in question, and this determination will, in general, involve inference.

The popularity of this classical view is now waning. Many cognitive scientists, linguists and philosophers no longer believe that concepts have a classical structure.<sup>46</sup> Critics point to the fact that, while some categories may have necessary and sufficient conditions for membership, many other categories, such as that of being a cup, do not. Moreover, our ability to discern properties often outstrips our linguistic capacities. Many times, we categorize objects without being able to articulate a principle or rule that underwrites the classification. We make sophisticated classificatory judgments about facial expressions and colors, for example, even though we cannot ourselves define these categories verbally.

Most damaging to the classical view is its apparent failure to explain a class of important experimental results called ‘typicality effects’. Research indicates that, for many categories, people are able to distinguish some category-members as more typical instances of the category than others, and furthermore, people generally report the same typicality ratings for candidate members.<sup>47</sup> In one set of such experiments, subjects were presented with several fruits and were asked how typical or representative each instance was of the category *fruit*. Apples and peaches were consistently rated as better examples of fruit than were raisins and figs. Raisins and figs were rated as more typical fruits than were pumpkins and olives.<sup>48</sup> The typicality ratings are interesting because they have been shown to predict the speed at which we judge objects to fall under the category in question. If our concept of a category consists in knowledge of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the category’s membership, then the cited typicality effects would appear difficult to explain.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Alvin Goldman, *Philosophical Applications of Cognitive Science* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), ch. 5; Barbara Malt and Edward Smith, ‘Correlated Properties in Natural Categories’, *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 23 (1984), pp. 250–69; Eleanor Rosch, ‘Natural Categories’, *Cognitive Psychology* 4 (1973), pp. 328–50; Eleanor Rosch, ‘Principles of Categorization’, in E. Rosch and B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978), pp. 28–48; and Edward Smith and Douglas Medin, *Categories and Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> See E. Rosch, ‘Human Categorization’, in N. Warren (ed.), *Studies in Cross-Cultural Psychology* (London: Academic Press, 1977), pp. 1–49, at pp. 22–23.

<sup>48</sup> Malt and Smith, ‘Correlated Properties in Natural Categories’.

<sup>49</sup> For dissenting opinions, see Eric Margolis, ‘A Reassessment of the Shift from the Classical Theory of Concepts to Prototype Theory’, *Cognition* 51 (1994), pp. 73–89; and Georges Rey, ‘Concepts and Stereotypes’, *Cognition* 15 (1983), pp. 237–62.

According to a new picture of categorization, having a concept need not involve knowing a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application. Rather, concepts consist in sub-sentential summary representations of the best members of the category in question. These representations are sometimes conceived of as prototypes. Prototypes aim to capture the most redundant and central features of the whole category.<sup>50</sup>

Consider the category *fruit*. Each member of this category could be represented as a set of discrete, co-occurring features. Apples, for example, are often red, round, hard, sweet, and grow on trees. Lemons have different sets of co-occurring characteristics; they are yellow, oval, sour, and grow on trees. Olives, for their part, are black and are not sweet. It might turn out that most fruits are round and grow on trees. Other qualities of the category-members, such as being red or sweet, might be particularly salient. Prototypes are summary representations of a category in terms of the category's perceived central and salient features. The prototypical fruit, then, might be red, round, sweet, and grow on trees. This prototypical fruit need not be an actual member of the category. Rather, it is a mental structure meant to capture the most common and prominent features had by actual category-members.

Importantly, these representations are not internalized propositional rules or principles. On this view, it is by matching an item to a prototype that we judge it to fall under a category or not. If the item is sufficiently similar to an agent's prototype for the category, then it is classified as an instance of it. Of course, if one forms an inadequate or inaccurate prototype for a category, then one is likely to reach false judgments concerning the category in question.

Crucially, the matching process is supposed to be non-inferential. Experimental results suggest that this procedure is neither theory-based nor the result of inferential reasoning.<sup>51</sup> Determining how similar an item is to the prototype is unlike a judgment insofar as it is not conscious and is non-linguistic and non-discursive. While psychologists have proposed many different models of the matching process,<sup>52</sup> the details of these various accounts are not important for our purposes. What is of interest is the general claim that many categorization judgments occur at a subverbal level and are not inferred from a higher-order rule or principle that specifies conditions for category-membership. The picture that emerges from this psychological account is one in which we have

<sup>50</sup> Rosch, 'Human Categorization'.

<sup>51</sup> See Edward Smith, 'Concepts and Categorization', in E. Smith and D. Osherson (eds.), *An Invitation to Cognitive Science: Thinking* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 3-33, at p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> See Rosch, 'Principles of Categorization'.

a capacity for non-inferential judgment that can be modeled in terms of a sensitivity to similarities and dissimilarities of particular cases to prototypes.

This psychological picture might help us see how some of our *moral* beliefs, those of both the general and particular sort, can be independently credible.<sup>53</sup> Consider the relatively general belief that lying is *prima facie* wrong. Lying is included among the central examples of morally wrong conduct, and as such, this feature would be included in an adequate prototype for moral wrongness. Once we have such a concept of moral wrongness, we do not need a further reason to think that lying is an instance of this category. We need not infer this truth from extraneous evidence, and this is why one's moral belief that lying is wrong might be held non-inferentially, and yet still be credible.

Consider, now, a belief about the moral status of a concrete instance of lying. Suppose we notice Smith eating the cake that Jones was intending to serve the company. Shortly thereafter, Jones asks Smith, 'Did you eat the cake?' and Smith responds, 'No'.<sup>54</sup> In this situation, our belief that what Smith did was *prima facie* morally wrong is also a candidate for independent credibility, although here, knowing it also requires some knowledge of Smith and his action. We clearly need to go beyond the concept of moral wrongness to know that Smith's conduct is morally objectionable, but this does not mean that we need to go beyond the bounds of the particular case itself, namely the case of Smith having done what he did, having lied, to see that it was wrong.

Ross wrote, '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.'<sup>55</sup> These particular moral facts might be non-inferentially known, in that given the right situation, once one adequately confronts the particular case in question, one need not rely on further facts or principles to reach a judgment about its *prima facie* moral features.<sup>56</sup> In the example described above, upon recognizing that Smith lied to Jones, our

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<sup>53</sup> Some philosophers have also noted the relevance of prototype theory to moral epistemology, yet they have not used the theory to develop a version of either moral intuitionism or moral self-evidence. See Gerald Dworkin, 'Unprincipled Ethics', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995), pp. 224-39, at pp. 232-33 and Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> This example is based upon a scenario used by Linda Coleman and Paul Kay in their study of judgments concerning lies ('Prototype Semantics: The English Word *Lie*', *Language* 57 [1981], pp. 26-44, at p. 31).

<sup>55</sup> Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 173, my emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> The importance of these psychological preliminaries to our non-inferential moral knowledge was also emphasized by Ewing, *The Morality of Punishment*, pp. 187-88, pp. 193-94, and Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', pp. 27-29.

belief that his conduct was *prima facie* wrong is not held on the basis of further reasoning. According to the psychological view I am suggesting, this is because matching Smith's action to one's prototype for *prima facie* wrongness is not a matter of inference. The matching process is not a reasoning process that moves from one set of believed propositions *p* (premises) to another proposition *q* (conclusion) on the basis of our seeing that *p* supports *q*.

One of the virtues of this account is that it can be extended to our categorizations of overall, as opposed to merely *prima facie*, right or wrong. As Ross himself recognized, there are many situations in which we do not need to deliberate or reason to discern what we are finally obligated to do. The inferential independence of such final moral judgments could be explained by the fact that our concepts of final moral qualities are also given by prototypes. When candidate actions are very similar to our prototypes for the moral category, then our application of the concept need not be mediated by discursive thinking or reasoning.

However, intuitionists should not claim that all moral judgments, final or otherwise, are non-inferential or independently credible. Moral deliberation and reasoning are often needed to reach a genuine conclusion about the moral status of an object of evaluation, especially if this status concerns a final duty that is not easy to discern. The fact that we sometimes engage in moral argumentation does not tell against a view according to which moral concepts are structured by moral prototypes. Indeed, I believe that the prototype account helps to explain and illuminate aspects of such moral deliberation. When the moral character of a concrete situation is unclear or under dispute, we often try to determine those morally salient and prototypical features of the situation at hand. Frequently, we engage in a search for specific similarities or dissimilarities to central examples, and not, or not primarily, for the correctness of a moral principle that governs the case.

Prototype theory helps us see how we can apply some moral concepts independently of inference, and it thereby accounts for the independent character of independently credible moral beliefs. Yet, this cognitive-psychological view is not intended also to establish the epistemic credibility or even the truth of such beliefs. At this point we might worry, how are we to be assured that such inferentially independent beliefs are true? Here is one response. The supposition that our moral beliefs in fact track real moral properties helps to explain the continued achievements in moral thinking over time, as well as the persistence of such moral theorizing.<sup>57</sup> In many respects, moral practice has been a

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<sup>57</sup> Unlike the Cornell realist, the intuitionist is not deploying this argument to the best explanation in first-order moral thought. It is a metaethical argument, advanced in the service of

moderate success. People often act morally; moral claims are correctable and have been corrected in the past. These facts give us a reason to think that some of our moral beliefs are at least approximately true. It would be hard to make sense of the apparent self-correcting mechanisms of our moral prototypes if they were systematically in error. Such a reply will not, of course, satisfy the skeptic, but it has not been my intention to do so. My aim has been, rather, to illuminate the character and nature of moral knowledge under the plausible assumption that we in fact have some of it. I cannot rule out a whole-scale skepticism about the truth of our moral beliefs. The possibility of such widespread moral error is part and parcel of any realist interpretation of moral thought.

Before concluding, it is worth highlighting the differences between my conception of non-inferential moral knowledge and Audi's. On Audi's account, once I have an adequate understanding of what a self-evident moral claim says, I can know it to be true, provided my belief is grounded in this understanding. Knowledge requires truth, and Audi is committed to the view that any self-evident moral belief is guaranteed to be true. Yet, it is certainly possible for independently credible moral beliefs to be false, so long as we allow, as we should, some independence between credibility and truth. The world simply might not go along with our credible conception of it. As I view it, non-inferential moral knowledge is not merely mediated by a conceptual understanding of what words mean. Rather, such knowledge further depends upon being appropriately sensitive to certain features, features that are instantiated in the world.<sup>58</sup>

What I have just said perhaps invites a further objection to my view. One might suppose that it is a virtue of Audi's account that self-evident moral beliefs are necessarily true. To illustrate, consider an eighteenth-century American slaveholder who non-inferentially believes that slavery is morally permissible. Audi is able to rule out this moral belief as non-self-evident, simply by citing its falsity. Since independently credible moral beliefs could be false, my position cannot find fault with the slaveholder's moral opinion on similar grounds, and this might seem to be a relative count in Audi's favor.

In reply, the belief in question is still false and is not an instance of knowledge, so it is at least faulty in this sense. Moreover, if one's prototype for moral permissibility were formed in an epistemically irresponsible fashion, or if the

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showing that at least some of our moral beliefs might be credible. Such arguments do not represent a piece of first-order moral deliberation to be on a par with first-order scientific theorizing.

<sup>58</sup> My appeal to prototype theory may indeed help illuminate the non-inferentiality of Audi's conclusions of reflection.

general belief-forming mechanism turned out to be unreliable, the belief's credibility could also be undermined. Nothing in my view requires us to attribute credibility to the slaveholder's moral belief.<sup>59</sup> The appropriate standards for credibility will depend on more specific results in epistemology, results which I believe are consistent with my version of intuitionism.

It is also important to recognize how different the above picture of moral cognition is from one according to which moral beliefs are inferred from moral principles. We do not always conclude that a particular action is *prima facie*, or even finally, wrong on the logical basis of premises that mention moral principles. Nor do we hold beliefs about general moral truths on the basis of empirical theorizing or inferences to the best explanation. Unlike physics, moral thinking is not usually theory-based or inferential in this way, and the above cognitive-psychological picture about concepts and concept-application lends support to the intuitionist's contention that we have such a capacity for non-inferential knowledge and shows this capacity to be neither strange, nor somehow specific to moral cognition.

## 6. Conclusion

Moral intuitionism is often misunderstood, and in this paper I have tried to suggest a way in which the intuitionistic commitment to non-inferential moral cognition could be made less objectionable. Yet, to have renewed moral intuitionism in metaethical theory is not merely to have made a historical point, or even a dialectical one—showing, for example, that intuitionism is more plausible than many suppose. With the increasing interest in moral realist views, such as Cornell moral realism, and in other contemporary forms of intuitionism, such as the intuitionistic theories of Robert Audi and Russ Shafer-Landau, moral intuitionism in general warrants closer attention as a viable option in contemporary metaethics. Crucially, intuitionism fleshes out the idea that moral knowledge need not pass through general moral theories or principles. In this regard, I believe that there is a sense in which many philosophers might already be intuitionists. Among Kantians, for example, there is the view that moral knowledge is possible independently of familiarity with

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<sup>59</sup> This response might raise again a skeptical worry, namely, how do we know that our moral prototypes are such as to lead to credible beliefs? Let me note that my position does not in this respect seem worse off than Audi's. Audi's appeal to self-evidence faces a similar set of issues, for we also cannot be certain that a moral belief is self-evidently true, or even that we have reflected upon the relevant concepts with enough care and adequacy.

the Categorical Imperative,<sup>60</sup> and consequentialists have often argued that too much attention to consequentialist moral principles can in fact prevent us from recognizing the course of action that is actually morally required.<sup>61</sup> Moral intuitionism is a beginning of an understanding of how this is possible, of how it is possible, for example, to know or justifiably believe that promise-breaking is morally wrong without holding this belief on the basis of premises.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> See Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984), pp. 134-71.

<sup>62</sup> I wish to thank D. Charles McCarty, Patrick McKee, Jack Mullen, C. James Tillman, and three anonymous referees for their helpful comments on this paper.