

A critique of ethical intuitionism as the foundation of knowledge

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Accepted 16 February, 2016

ABSTRACT

Scholars claim that there are different sources of knowledge. These sources have come to be thought of as foundations for knowledge. Cognitivists are not united on the foundation of knowledge but they agree that knowledge is possible as against the skeptics. Intuitionism is a cognitive theory which states that knowledge is attainable through the mental faculty of intuition. Our concern in this paper centres on what might be called ethical intuitionism. Although there are variants of this theory, intuitionists believe that there are objective moral facts which are self-evident or known through intuition. In this form, it has been classified as ethical non-naturalism because it does not depend on empirical verification of its principles or truths. We shall argue that there are serious objections to ethical intuitionism. Moreover, we shall show that ethical intuitionism does not take cognizance of important findings in psychology and biology regarding human dispositions which are capable of being expressed in "naturalistic terms".

Keywords: Ethical, intuitionism, foundation, knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Naturalists and anti-naturalists agree that there are objective facts which exist in reality. For naturalists, such objective facts are discoverable or cognizable through natural objects or properties but non-naturalists reject this view by arguing that we can only recognize things through other avenues such as intuition, feelings, emotions, etc. There are many contemporary intuitionists but we can find some classical foundations of intuitionism in the history of philosophy especially in the rank of rationalists. For example, in classical philosophy, Socrates led a slave boy, who was uneducated, through dialogue to deduce axioms which the boy was unaware of. In modern philosophy also we can also notice some traces of intuitionism in the positions of philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Spinoza.

Descartes, for example, believed that there are innate ideas in humans which make *a priori* knowledge possible. Such knowledge may be said to be distinct, clear and indubitable and are not based on experience for proof. This explains the status of the deductive method in the process of cognition. To this extent, Plato and Descartes

were in agreement. Spinoza also claimed that intuition enables human beings to cognize the essence of things.

If we disregard the views of rationalists because of their penchant to ignore perceptual knowledge and go over to empiricists for a solution we discover that the matter becomes even more complicated. For example, John Locke, regarded generally as the father of modern empiricism, held that we cannot perceive objects directly as we can only perceive the ideas and impressions of such objects of experience. This "mentalist" aspect of Locke's epistemology finds some form of expression in Immanuel Kant's concept of *synthetic a priori* truths by which he claimed concepts and percepts are united in the process of cognition.

Thus, besides reason and sense experience, we note that Spinoza believed that intuition is a third type of knowledge. What this means is that, there are some self-evident truths or principles which we are knowable without recourse to rational and empirical proofs. It is not only in the realm of ethics that intuitionism applies as we have such theories as mathematical intuitionism,

philosophical intuitionism, etc. In these areas, the inescapable conclusion is that the mind plays an important role in cognition. The difference with rationalism is that intuitionists believe that intuition is the foundation of our knowledge without need for proofs – we just know things. Such things, moreover, are objective facts of reality.

The view that intuition is the foundation of knowledge has led critics to declare that the theory is a form of pluralism. If this is the case, the problem that arises is whether each individual's intuition can be relied upon to provide accurate knowledge that is universal in nature. In other words, should each individual have the right to claim that his or her intuitive perception of things should stand irrespective of the perception of others on the same subject? Should an individual, following from Protagoras, be the measure of all things? Ojong (2014) seems to reject such a scenario by stating that "in spite of the diversity of the foundations of morality or moral values, there is yet reasonable latitude of universally acceptable rational determination of the moral principles of judging morality of human conduct" (203). To this view, interestingly, ethical intuitionists would agree because it is a "pluralistic deontological theory".

There are different aspects of intuitionism. Since our concern is with ethical intuitionism, we shall show that, in principle, intuitionists claim that there are basic moral truths which are not inferential in nature. This fundamental position asserts, by implication, that moral facts cannot be reduced to natural properties or facts. Of course, this issue is at the root of the division between naturalism and anti-naturalism.

INTUITIONISM

Mautner (2000) states that the term was coined by J. S. Mill to refer to the views of Hamilton, Whewell and others whose views were anti-empiricist in content. Mautner (2000) goes ahead to list some twentieth century intuitionists to include Prichard, Ross and Ewing. It is difficult to analyze intuition without mention of G. E. Moore and his now-famous "naturalistic fallacy" and his view that "Good" is indefinable (1903). In the area of mathematics, some of the important intuitionists include Frege, Russell, Cantor and Brouwer. For example, Brouwer (2000:2) stated that the question of whether mathematical exactness exists can be answered by saying: "in the intellect". This is a fairly general belief by intuitionists whether in ethics, logic, mathematics or epistemology – the view that there is a mental faculty of intuition responsible for cognition of objects. This means that in the process of cognition there is an immediate apprehension of truths through the understanding. It is because of this belief that mathematical intuitionists, for example, support the idea that mathematics is a mental activity.

The author thinks that, this line of reasoning can be extended to other areas which appropriate intuitionism. The implication is that there are objective facts which can only be apprehended through intuition. Furthermore, it is a theory which claims that a perceived object is known to be real through intuition. This explains why there is a disagreement between naturalism and anti-naturalism of which intuitionism is a variant. Thus, in the opinion of Mautner "intuitionism is a general theory for any claim in which it is believed that through intuition we can gain immediate insight or knowledge, in contrast to insight or knowledge arrived at discursively by means of analysis or proof" (280).

In the areas of psychology and computation, there are scholars who believe that there is a link between intuition, insight and creativity. This is one of the views of Simon (1996) who argues that this relationship raises a number of possibilities in computational theories of cognition. Simon (1996:167) characterizes intuition in the following way:

We usually recognize the presence of intuition when someone solves a problem quite rapidly ("instantaneously") upon presentation, and especially when he or she cannot give an account of how the solution came about. ("It just suddenly entered my mind".)

If intuition is taken in this general sense, it might present some conceptual difficulties with respect to the status of knowledge which is obtained through intuition. The problem would be on how to justify intuitive knowledge without recourse to either experience or reason. Simon (1996) even raised more problems by claiming that the more knowledgeable one is the better the reliability of the knowledge from intuition as a result of accumulation of evidence. By this account, it follows that intuition is actually a product of experience rather than the existence of a mental faculty responsible for intuition. It is not surprising that some opponents of intuitionism have questioned the reliability of knowledge based on intuition.

Subsequently, we shall deal with ethical intuitionism, a theory that has had mixed fortunes in terms of respectability. We shall highlight both the strong and weak aspects of the major tenets of intuitionism with respect to three of the major proponents of the theory in contemporary ethical discourse. These scholars are Moore, Ross and Prichard. We shall not lose sight of the fact that intuitionism is a variant of anti-naturalism which is opposed to naturalism. To this extent, it is easy to understand why some opponents of intuitionism are of the opinion that the theory is anti-science. Indeed, McNaughton (nd) has stated that critics have raised the charge against intuitionism "that it invokes a weird faculty of moral awareness, unknown to science" (1). We shall later explore this issue in order to determine its veracity with reference to the view that human intuition is

produced by a particular faculty of the mind. Moreover, intuitionists are also cognitivists because of their view that propositions can be determined to be either true or false – based on intuition. These tenets of intuition have raised some objections by opponents of the theory.

MORAL INTUITIONISM

Moral or ethical intuitionism follows along the broad outlines of intuitionism already stated above. It is helpful to note that it is in the area of ethics that intuitionism has generated much scholarly interest. This means that intuitionism cannot be discussed without noting its impact in the area of ethics. Singer (1991) has attempted to explain what moral intuitionism means by stating as follows:

Intuitionism holds that claims about morality can be objectively true or false, and that we can come to know moral principles are right in a special way, by a kind of intuition or direct awareness of their moral properties (xv).

Dancy (1991) follows Singer to assert that, in the present era, an intuitionist is one who believes that the way to know or distinguish between right and wrong actions is through intuition – or direct awareness. Thus, for Dancy (1991), intuitionists claim that we “grasp moral principles by intuition” (411). That moral principles exist and that they are knowable are not questioned by supporters of intuitionism. This form of objectivism is however different from the position of naturalists. While both naturalists and intuitionists support the view that moral statements exist and are informative they disagree as to whether they possess natural properties or non-natural properties.

Uduigwomen (2006) has highlighted this difference between naturalism and intuitionism in the following way:

While ethical naturalists believed that moral terms refer to certain natural properties of actions or states of affairs which are verifiable by sense experience, the intuitionists believed that moral terms refer to non-natural qualities that can only be grasped by moral intuition (87).

Based on this difference, it is understandable why critics assert that intuitionism is opposed to science. Scholars who make this charge may base their arguments on some of the variants of empiricism such as positivism, inductivism, justificationism, etc. In these cases, a proposition is meaningful or true if it can be factually verified. In other words, the factual content of the proposition must not be in question. The irony, however, is that intuitionists, such as Moore, were defenders of common sense knowledge – what Russell (1979) approvingly characterized as knowledge by

acquaintance. It is interesting that Russell did actually hold some form of intuitionism even against the background that he was an unapologetic empiricist who believed that all definite knowledge belongs to science.

Russell (1979) modified his empiricism and characterized it as logical empiricism in order to avoid the difficulties inherent in thorough going or naïve empiricism. Russell also was compelled to modify his empiricism to accommodate the significance of hypotheses, deduction and universals in science. The matter was further complicated by Moore whose analysis of language relied on commonsense notion of naïve realism.

We have highlighted the difficulties of Russell and Moore in their appropriation of intuition to support their theories while differing from each other in their overall philosophical outlooks. The problem these philosophers faced can easily be resolved by taking into account that intuitionism can be said to have two versions – the rationalist version and the empiricist version. The rationalist version supports non-inferential moral facts or truth on *a priori* grounds while the empiricist version defends non-inferential moral facts or truths on the basis of sense perception. These two versions form part of intuitionism and could cause confusion because an empiricist could defend perceptual knowledge on the basis of knowledge that has foundation in sense experience but also hold rationalist version of intuition with respect to moral issues.

In another perspective, moral intuitionists can also be divided into two groups according to whether one is a teleologist or a deontologist. Uduigwomen (2006) has stated that Moore was a teleologist while Prichard and Ross were deontologists. For Uduigwomen (2006:89), “the difference between these two types of thinkers is that the teleologists consider the moral value (positive or negative) of actions to be determined by the end to which such actions are a means, while deontologists believe that the rightness or wrongness, goodness or evil of an action is intrinsic to the action in question”.

Moore, Ross and Prichard are some of the most important proponents of moral intuitionism but it is necessary to note that Moore is credited with setting the tone for moral discourse in twentieth century western philosophy. Within the context of this paper, it is not possible to examine in detail the views of important moral intuitionists. This is the reason that we shall concentrate on some of the major views of Moore, Ross and Prichard. Moore's contribution to intuitionism cannot be overstated. Sinnot – Armstrong (2011) made this point. According to him:

G. E. Moore's diatribe against the naturalistic fallacy in 1903 set the stage for most of twentieth century moral philosophy. The main protagonists over the next sixty years were intuitionists and emotivists, both of whom were convinced by Moore that empirical science is irrelevant to

moral philosophy and common moral beliefs (1).

Moore's repudiation of naturalistic attempts to identify ethical concepts such as "Good" is well known. In his classic, *Principia Ethica*, Moore claimed that "Good" is indefinable and that any attempt to define it in terms of some natural property or quality is fallacious. According to Moore (1903:15) "If I am asked "what is good?" my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked "How is good to be defined?" my answer is that it cannot be defined".

This basis for Moore's view is his belief that ethical concepts contain simple properties which are not analyzable. This view was also followed by both Prichard and Ross although they also had their own original contributions. As we had mentioned earlier, Prichard and Ross differ from Moore because they were deontologists. Prichard held on to the view that direct intuition is necessary to establish the moral duties of individuals. To appreciate what constitutes an obligation in a moral setting, it will be necessary to examine the exigencies surrounding the moral action in question in order to determine its relation to other actions. This will require some form of moral thinking. The self-evident nature of moral principles was accepted by Prichard.

In the case of Ross, the issue of what makes moral facts relevant was considered. Moreover, Ross examined the notion of prima facie duties which he believed constitute principles of conduct. For Ross (1930), the qualities which we judge when we make moral decisions are non-inferential. Ross' view is that we are able to apprehend prima facie duties without recourse to any other avenue. The problem, of course, is the problem of conflict between duties in a given situation.

The above summary of Moore, Ross and Prichard was aimed at highlighting some of the major tenets of moral intuitionism. It is by no means exhaustive. Some of these tenets include that moral facts are apprehensible through intuition and that they are self-evident and not based on some natural properties or qualities.

EVALUATION OF MORAL INTUITIONISM

Generally, moral intuitionists claim that moral principles or truths can be held "without any form of proof" (Ross, 1930:29). This is because they argue that moral facts are different from empirical facts and, for this reason, they are non-inferential. As Luke (2014) has pointed out:

... natural facts can be known by purely empirical means, whereas non-natural moral facts cannot be known in this way. Such facts involve an essentially *a priori* element. Intuitively the intuitionists seem right. Empirical investigation can tell us many things about the

world, but it does not seem that it can tell whether certain acts are right or wrong, good or bad. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

This may be the case in some instances but it is possible to reduce moral statements to empirical statements whose truth-values can be settled by empirical analysis or investigation. Moral statements of the kind "lying is wrong", and "killing is wrong" can be reformulated in such a way that we can state whether they are true or false.

Moreover, intuitionists believe that intuition helps to establish the right course of action in a given moral situation. By extension, intuitionists argue that moral truths are self-evident and can be apprehended directly through the intuition. The problem however is that, intuition is regarded by intuitionists as objective – as if individuals would always apprehend or perceive things in the same way. Moore had this problem also in his analysis of ordinary language by claiming that common sense is a guide towards the analysis of concepts – as if all individuals possess the same common sense view of reality.

This leads us to the issue of counter-intuitive arguments. If there is a moral dispute between individuals and they all bring up different arguments to support their positions based on their intuitions, whose intuition should be accepted as the correct one?

Another issue which raises conceptual difficulties is the view that moral statements are non-inferential. This view exposes intuitionists to an attack by skeptics as it makes intuitive knowledge to lack solid grounds for justification. This amounts to saying that moral beliefs are justified independently of an inferential ability even if they lacked that ability (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2011:3). Even though it would seem that intuitionists avoid the problem of infinite regress by making moral knowledge non-inferential their position opens them to attack by empirical scientists and some cognitivists such as naturalists.

It seems that some empiricists, such as Bertrand Russell, who support some form of meta-ethical analysis, agree that there is a fundamental difference between matters of value and matters of fact (Russell, 1979). As far as Russell was concerned, matters of value lie outside the realm of science and this means that we have no empirical way of judging whether they are valid or not. Thus, Russell asserted that science is limited with respect to questions about values. In his view, "whatever can be known, can be known by means of science; but things which are legitimately matter's of feeling lie outside its provinces" (Russell, 1979:788). By this position, Russell seems to be in support of the is/ought dichotomy. Moreover, it could be inferred from his views that moral truths are non-inferential. But, of course, Russell would not endorse the view that moral truths are self-evident in nature.

However, some scholars have pointed out that it is a

mistake to shield moral issues from the searchlight of science. They believe that the use of scientific methods in analysis of moral issues will be of immense benefit toward an understanding of moral decisions. This is the opinion of Sinnott – Armstrong and a few others who believe that G. E. Moore's view led to the anti-scientific attitude of many contemporary scholars in ethics. He thinks that this must come to an end.

This seems to be the position of many social cognitivists who believe that science can analyze normative issues in such a way that moral facts are reducible to empirical facts. This opinion is summarized to mean that:

...One cannot make a sharp distinction between the empirical and the conceptual/theoretical/normative. Psychology qua empirical science ineluctably will be involved in conceptual, theoretical, and normative issues (O'Donohue and Kitchener, 1996:17).

It might sound as if this is a resurrection of the much maligned logical positivism, but it does make sense to see which areas of ethics are conformable to scientific investigation especially if we take moral principles as informative in nature. This does not mean that all normative issues must be subjected to empirical analysis before they can be regarded as informative or meaningful.

Uduigwomen (2006:92-93) has highlighted a number of objections leveled against intuitionism which include:

- a) Moral truths are not like synthetic truths.
- b) It is difficult to defend the notions of a priori truths, self-evidence, etc, in ethics.
- c) Intuition is out of sync with developments in empirical and cognitive sciences.
- d) Non-cognitivists contend that ethical statements express favourable and unfavourable attitudes and not with issues of facts.

These criticisms are important but intuitionists have attempted to respond to them from their own perspective. But we think that intuitionists are not correct in their views about objective knowledge, self-evident truths, independence, etc. This is because these terms have connotations which are inferential in nature. Moreover, intuition cannot be said to be objective in the sense that empirical facts can be said to be objective in the world of phenomena. Furthermore, it makes sense to look for a more stable standard or foundation on which to situate moral knowledge than on intuition which is prone to subjectivism. In addition, intuitionists do not agree on some of the major tenets of the theory. While some are teleologists, others are deontologists.

CONCLUSION

There are genuine objections against moral intuitionism. However, intuitionism seems to capture the imagination of people by its claim that we possess the innate capacity to apprehend moral truths directly without the need for external proofs. In many cases, our intuition has been proved right but this has not always been the case. It does also look as if our intuition is sometimes facilitated by some form of inferential reasoning. This means that, moral knowledge can sometimes be based on inferential reasoning which can be subjected to empirical investigation.

What this means is that moral knowledge benefits from both *a priori* and *a posteriori* principles. We are of the view that this is a good thing and not something that should be deplored since there are situations in a moral disagreement where the moral truth is simply not self-evident.

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Citation: Ogar, J. N. and Anyim, N. M, (2016). A critique of ethical intuitionism as the foundation of knowledge. *African Educational Research Journal*, 4(1): 8-12.
