

## **A Philosophical Investigation on Intuitionism and its Ethical Implications**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper captures a thought-provoking investigation of intuitionism from a critical point of view. A quick brainstorming on intuitionism produces the following questions begging for answers: What are the implications of intuitionism to ethics? Does intuitionism as a Meta-ethical theory have an objective definition void of constructive criticisms? Or are there questionable remarks about its legitimacy? Should intuitionism be completely relegated to the background? Using the analytic method, it was discovered that the line of approach for a philosophical researcher on intuitionism is wide open. As a result, the work concentrates on a panoramic view of intuitionism while paying particular attention to the rationalists and empiricists versions of intuitionism. The rationalist version of ethical intuitionism models ethical intuitions on a priori, non-empirically-based intuitions of truths, such as basic truths of mathematics. The empiricist version of ethical intuitionism models non-inferential ethical knowledge on experience, not inference. The researchers further examine the merits and demerits of this meta-ethical theory while taking cognizance of intuitionism as inventive skill and creative vision; intuitionism as the clearest and most certain kind of knowledge. Still focusing on the analytic method, it was realized that there are serious difficulties against any form of intuitionism since it seems to downplay the fundamental anthropology of the human person as a rational being. But this is without any bias or preconception to the fact that we tend to intuitively decide on our course of action sometimes but oftentimes, we are faced with conflicting alternatives to choose from which demands a carefully thought out decision other than just intuition. It also concludes that man as a material being cannot do without the natural concretization of moral goodness as against the claim of the ethical intuitionists.

**Keywords:** *Intuitionism, Ethical Intuitionism, Ethics, Philosophical Investigation*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One is already familiar with the fact that there are three main inquiries in ethics. Normative ethics, applied ethics and meta-ethics. Whereas the fields of normative ethics addresses such

questions as “What should one do?” Special or applied ethics attempts to deal with specific realms of human action and to craft criteria for discussing issues that might arise within those realms. Meta-ethics as one of these divisions is the branch of ethics that seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes, moral values, and judgments. It is the study of ethics itself. It delves into the language, nature, motivation, and source of morality. Meta-ethics focuses on “What is goodness?” and “How can we tell what is good from what is bad?” It is concerned with the meaning or significance of calling something right or wrong (or good or bad).<sup>i</sup> Intuitionism falls within the realm of meta-ethics.

Generally speaking, rationalist ethical intuitionism models the acquisition of non-inferential moral knowledge on *a priori*, non-empirical knowledge, such as knowledge of mathematical truths; whereas moral sense theory models the acquisition of non-inferential moral knowledge on empirical knowledge, such as knowledge of the colours of objects. The questions which immediately come to mind are: what is intuitionism from a philosophical point of view? Is intuitionism a tenable or plausible concept in ethics? Or are there questionable remarks about its legitimacy as an ethical theory? Should intuitionism as an ethical theory be completely relegated to the background? In an attempt to constructively give answers to these questions, following the analytic method, the work shall unfold systematically in this order: a panoramic view of intuitionism; merits of intuitionism; criticism of intuitionism; conclusion and recommendations. The work shall end with endnotes and a bibliography.

### **A PANORAMIC VIEW OF INTUITIONISM**

Ethical intuitionism is the thesis that our intuitive awareness of value, or intuitive knowledge of evaluative facts, forms the foundation of our ethical knowledge. The view at its core forms the foundation of moral knowledge: it is the view that some moral truths can be known non-inferentially.<sup>ii</sup> (Known without one needing to infer them from other truths). In philosophy, the term "ethical intuitionism" is frequently used with significant variation. This paper is concerned with a philosophical analysis of the intuitionism in general. In this sense, “ethical intuitionism” and “intuitionism” will be used interchangeably.

### **A Philosophical Investigation of Intuitionism**

One of the most distinctive features of Ethical Intuitionism is its epistemology. All classic intuitionists maintained that basic moral propositions are self-evident—that is, evident in and of themselves—and so can be known without the need of any argument. Richard Price distinguishes intuition from two other grounds of knowledge—namely, immediate consciousness or feeling on the one hand, and argumentation, on the other. Argumentation, or deduction, is knowledge that is ultimately derived from what is immediately apprehended or deduced, either by sensation or by the understanding. Immediate consciousness, or feeling, is the mind's awareness of its own existence and mental states.<sup>iii</sup> It shares immediacy with intuition, but unlike intuition does not have as its object a self-evident proposition. Such immediate self-consciousness is immediate apprehension by sensation. Intuition is immediate apprehension by understanding. It is the way that we apprehend self-evident truths, general and abstract ideas, “and anything else we may discover, without making any use of any process of reasoning.”<sup>iv</sup> The claim that intuition is immediate apprehension by understanding suggests a notion of intuition in Richard Price that is more akin to current accounts of intuitions as intellectual presentations.<sup>v</sup> Intellectual presentations are the intellectual analogue of perceptual understanding. Just as certain things can

be seen perceptually to be in a certain way, e.g., coloured, or straight, so certain propositions can seem to be true, or present themselves to the mind as true. These presentations are not beliefs, for something can seem true even though one does not believe it, e.g., it may seem true that there are more natural numbers than even numbers, but we know that is false, so we do not believe it.

W. D. Ross uses the notion of apprehension to explain intuition but he tends to base his moral theory largely on our considered moral convictions. For him, “the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics, just as sense-perceptions are the data of natural science”<sup>vi</sup> Convictions are, however, a certain type of belief rather than an intellectual apprehension, or presentation. So it looks like we can find two notions of intuition in intuitionist thought—one understood as an intellectual presentation or apprehension, and the other as a pre-theoretical, non-inferred, firmly held belief or conviction. The option an intuitionist opts for makes a difference to his or her epistemology. But Price insists that all reasoning and knowledge must ultimately rest on propositions that are not inferred from other premises. That is, those that are known intuitively or spontaneously. For ethical intuitions this non-inferred basis of knowledge is self-evident truth grasped by intuition. It is, however, important to keep intuition and self-evidence separate for a number of reasons. First, a conscious intuition is a certain mental state, either a non-inferential belief or an intellectual presentation. But a self-evident proposition is not a conscious mental state. Second, intuition is a way in which we are aware of self-evident propositions, whereas self-evident propositions are the things that can be known in this way. Such propositions could be believed without an intuition of them. For example, one might have some argument that leads one to believe a self-evident proposition, or one may believe it on the basis of authoritative testimony (especially when it comes from a credible authority). Thirdly, it may turn out that things other than self-evident propositions can be grasped by intuition. For instance, we may have moral intuitions about concrete cases, but it is not obvious that the contents of these intuitions are self-evident propositions; whether they are may depend on how self-evidence is understood. Richard Price rightly claims that self-evident truths are “incapable of proof”<sup>vii</sup>. Most classical intuitionists endorse this view, for they all agree to a greater extent that self-evident moral propositions “cannot be proved, just as certitude needs no proof.”<sup>viii</sup>

For Ross “the fact that something can be inferred does not prove that it cannot be seen intuitively.”<sup>ix</sup> If he thinks that some proposition can be inferred from other propositions and be self-evident, he clearly thinks that its being self-evident does not rule out the possibility of a proof. In any case there is nothing in the notion of a self-evident proposition that rules out justification or argument for that proposition. It may be deduced that the reason that Ross switches between making the stronger claim that self-evident propositions *cannot* be justified, and the weaker claim that they need no justification, is that he had in mind a belief in some self-evident proposition when he said they could be justified, and our intuition (apprehension) of that proposition when he said that they could not.

### **Self-Evidence**

The notion of a self-evident proposition is a pertinent term in intuitionist thought, and needs to be distinguished from certain common sense understandings with which it may easily be conflated. The first thing to note is that a self-evident proposition is not the same as an obvious truth since an obvious truth is relative to certain individuals or groups. What is obvious to you may not be obvious to me. But self-evidence is not relative in this way. A proposition is just self-

evident, not self-evident *to* someone and not to another. Secondly, there are many obvious truths that are not self-evident. Certain well-known empirical truths, for example, that if I drop a heavy object it will fall, or that the world is bigger than a football, are obvious but not self-evident. There are also self-evident propositions that may not be obvious to everyone, for example, if all 'As' are 'Bs' and no 'Bs' are 'Cs' then no 'Cs' are 'As'. What then is it for a proposition to be self-evident? Locke says that a self-evident proposition is one that "carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof: he that understands the terms assents to it for its own sake"<sup>x</sup>. Price tells us that a self-evident proposition is immediate, and needs no further proof, and goes on to say that self-evident proposition need only be understood to gain assent.<sup>xi</sup> Ross asserts, a self-evident proposition is "evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself"<sup>xii</sup> and Broad describes self-evident propositions as being "such that a rational being of sufficient insight and intelligence could see it to be true by merely inspecting it and reflecting on its terms and their mode of combination"<sup>xiii</sup> These passages may have led to the standard understanding of a self-evident proposition that one finds in Shafer-Landau and Audi.<sup>xiv</sup> Audi, for instance, writes that self-evident propositions are "truths such that (1) adequately understanding them is sufficient justification for believing them ..., and (2) believing them on the basis of adequately understanding them entails knowing them"<sup>xv</sup>

One should distinguish knowing a self-evident proposition from knowing that that proposition is self-evident. The former does not imply the latter. Someone might know some self-evident proposition, such as that if *A* is better than *B* and *B* is better than *C* then *A* is better than *C*, but lack the concept of self-evidence, so couldn't know that, that proposition is self-evident. One might even know a self-evident proposition whilst endorsing a theory according to which no propositions are self-evident. Given that a proposition may seem to be self-evident when it is not, we have to have some way of distinguishing the merely apparent from the real ones. Sidgwick's criteria may be regarded as helping us do this. To be sure that a proposition is self-evident it must: (1) be clear and distinct (2) be ascertained by careful reflection (3) Be consistent with other self-evident truths and (4) must Attract general consensus.<sup>xvi</sup>

According to Sidgwick, if any apparent self-evident proposition does not have all of these features then we should reduce our confidence that it is a genuine self-evident proposition. The point is that we do not need to know that a proposition is self-evident in order to know whether it is true or not because logically speaking; a proposition is a verbal expression capable of being either True or False.<sup>xvii</sup>

Given that some philosophers use the term "ethical intuitionism" in moral philosophy to refer to the general position that we have some non-inferential moral knowledge that is, basic moral knowledge that is not inferred from or based on any proposition, it is important to distinguish between empiricists versus rationalist models. Some reserve the term "ethical intuitionism" for the rationalist model and the term "moral sense theory" for the empiricist models.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Rationalists Intuitionism**

The rationalist version of ethical intuitionism models ethical intuitions on a priori, non-empirically-based intuitions of truths, such as basic truths of mathematics. Take for example the belief that two minus one is one. This piece of knowledge is often thought to be non-inferential in that it is not grounded in or justified by some other proposition or claim. Rather, one who

understands the relevant concepts involved in the proposition that two minus one is one has what one might call an "intuition" of the truth of the proposition. One intuits the truth of the proposition, rather than inferring it. Likewise, the ethical intuitionist claims that basic moral truths—whether they are principles (such as *don't kill people*) or judgments (such as *it is wrong to kill people*)—are known without inference, and in particular they are known via one's rational intuition. Some rationalist ethical intuitionists characterize moral intuitions as a species of belief that are self-evident in that they are justified simply by virtue of one understanding of the proposition believed<sup>xix</sup>. Others characterize intuitions as a distinct kind of mental state, in which something *seems* to one to be the case (whether one believes it or not) as a result of intellectual reflection. For example, Michael Huemer defines intuition as a sort of seeming in which reasoning sometimes changes how things seem to us.<sup>xx</sup> But there is also a way things seem to us prior to reasoning; otherwise, reasoning could not get started. The way things seem prior to reasoning we may call an 'initial appearance'. An initial, *intellectual* appearance is an intuition. Regardless of one's definition of rational intuition, intuitionists all agree that rational intuitions are not justified by inference from a separate belief.

### **Moral Sense (Empiricist Version)**

Another version—what one might call the empiricist version of ethical intuitionism models non-inferential ethical knowledge on sense perception. This version involves what is often called a "moral sense". According to moral sense theorists, certain moral truths are known via this moral sense simply on the basis of experience, not inference. We can analogically understand the *moral sense* as informing us of what is good. People with a functioning moral sense get a clear impression of wrongness when they see people being killed.

### **"Intuitivism"**

Robert Audi points out that in applied ethics, philosophers frequently appeal to intuitions to justify their claims, even though they do not call themselves intuitionists. Audi hence uses the label "intuitivists" to refer to people who are intuitionists without labelling themselves as such. On this broad understanding of intuitionism, there are only a few ways someone doing moral philosophy might *not* count as an intuitionist. First, they might really refrain from relying on intuitions in moral philosophy altogether (say, by attempting to derive all moral claims from claims about what certain individuals desire). Second, they might deny foundationalism in favour of coherentism. Third, they might be non-cognitivists, holding that moral "beliefs" aren't really beliefs at all.<sup>xxi</sup>

### **MERITS OF INTUITIONISM**

Since intuitionism is knowledge that is acquired directly by an immediate contact of the mind with the object without going through the process of reasoning, it can be considered as an inventive skill or a creative vision.

#### **Intuitionism as an Inventive Skill and a Creative Vision**

At this juncture, it can be established that intuitive knowledge comes to the mind as a flash. As such, it becomes meritorious knowledge when it comes in a form of inventive intuition that is, when in a flash, a certain bright idea comes to our mind as a kind of vision. For instance, Archimedes was reported to have had a vision of the law of floatation in a flash while taking his bath. He was so overwhelmed by the vision that he rushed naked to record such a very important

intuitive knowledge before it escaped his memory.<sup>xxii</sup> From this perspective, it can be deduced that intuitive knowledge is very significant to education because most scientific discoveries have been the products of insight or intuition. The educational value of intuition is that it enables one to listen to his or her inner voice or flash of ideas before trying to either put them down or prove them either empirically or rationally as Archimedes did.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **Intuitionism as the Clearest and Most Certain Knowledge**

Another important advantage of intuitive knowledge is that it is the clearest and most certain kind of knowledge. It permits no contradictions and can allow us to know what exists just as we can intuitively know that we exist. It is immediate knowledge which leaves no doubt to the mind.<sup>xxiv</sup> It can be likened to Kant's analytic *a priori* knowledge or judgment because it is based on the principle of non-contradiction. It can also be likened to Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgments because it contains the marks of necessity and universality and it cannot be validated by experience. For Kant, there is a kind of knowledge that gives us more than we get from analyzing concepts and more than we get from collecting sense impressions. For example, the judgment seven plus five equal twelve ( $7+5=12$ ) is certainly *a priori* because it contains the marks of necessity and universality; that is, seven plus five has to equal twelve, and it always has to do so. At the same time, this judgment is synthetic because twelve cannot be derived by a mere analysis of the numbers seven and five. The act of intuition is necessary in order to achieve a synthesis of the concepts seven, five and plus.<sup>xxv</sup>

### **CRITICISMS OF INTUITIONISM**

According to Austin Fagothey, there are serious difficulties against any form of intuitionism. Intuition is a Latin word for insight; a looking in, and therefore a very appropriate word for direct activity of the intellect in grasping self-evident truths. But it has become associated with hunches (an impression that something might be the case), wild guesses, irrational inspirations, clairvoyance (an apparent power to perceive things that are not present to the senses), lacking in scientific respectability as to give utterly the wrong impression.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Therefore, it ought to be noted in the first place that an appeal to intuition has the disadvantage of being immune to objective criticism. One claim to see it and no one can prove that he or she does not, another can prove that he or she does. The two claims are not contradictory, for each reports only his or her own experience. Such intuitive knowledge if it exists can be of benefit only to the possessor and cannot be used to convince anyone else unless most people testify to having the same intuition. This sort of private knowledge lacks the universal character of scientific knowledge. Since there is no common agreement on moral intuitions, an appeal to intuition in morals can result only to subjectivism, each one following a personal moral code privately discovered by personal insights.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Next, those who find that they do not experience moral intuitions are either left without any ethics while obliged to live ethically or are obliged to develop an ethical theory on some other grounds. They have to judge both their own ethical theory and the intuitionists' theory on some basis other than intuition, which by hypothesis they themselves do not possess. The intuitionists, however, must either appeal to intuition to establish the truth of their own theory, thus convincing only themselves or they must abandon intuition and resort to rational argument when it comes to establishing their theory; either way shows the weakness of the method.<sup>xxviii</sup>

According to Obi, the summary of what the intuitionists are saying is that man is endowed with intuitional capacity to immediately deduce the good in an action and decide on the good to opt for and the bad to refrain from prior to reflection, reasoning and consideration.<sup>xxxix</sup> He notes that as simple as it may sound, intuitionism presents a picture of the human person who is primarily an intuitional being but man by nature is primarily a rational being who cannot do without reasoning and reflecting on the course of action to opt for and the one to refrain from.<sup>xxx</sup> But Obi maintains that this is without prejudice to the fact that we tend to intuitively decide on our course of action sometimes but oftentimes, we are faced with conflicting alternatives to choose from which demands a carefully thought out decision other than just intuition.<sup>xxxi</sup> As a matter of fact, understanding the fundamental anthropology of the human person is quite basic to a proper appreciation of man as a rational being. Intuitionists seem to downplay the ancient but relevant definition of man by Boethius. According to him, '*persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*,' that is, the person is an individual substance of a rational nature.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Again, the intelligibility of things is not given to us in an immediate way as the intuitionists seem to propound. We do not grasp the essence of a thing just by looking at it. Knowledge of material reality is always the point of departure for human thought. This is so because the things of our experience are sensible in actuality, intelligible in potency. For instance, if we see a group of people running about after around object, waving their hands, jumping and so on, we have to observe closer, comparing and keeping in mind the various movements in order to understand their reason. Only after this experimental knowledge in which both the external and the internal senses agree do we arrive at the point of understanding that which holds this interplay of relations and actions together. We understand that this game is a game, may be a specific game of handball. We have arrived at a new concept. In other words, the intelligible reality that first existed only potentially in our experience has now passed to an intelligible reality in act.

## CONCLUSION

In its ethical sense, Intuitionism holds as futile any attempt to analyze or define goodness in Physical or psychological things that exist in the natural world. Reflecting on this claim, a critical mind would ask: is it possible for man as a material being to avoid the concretization of goodness? One cannot avoid the analysis of goodness in terms of its natural concreteness as against the claims of the Ethical Intuitionist. No doubt that intuition plays some roles in the moral living of man by helping man in the immediate consciousness of moral expectations but the underlining caveat to this is that moral decision making should not be dependent solely on intuition but must be subjected to reason for more balanced choices.

The research has been preoccupied with a philosophical analysis of intuitionism as a meta-ethical theory. In order to attain this goal, one had a closer look at intuitionism from a panoramic point of view. Its merits and demerits were also critically analyzed. It was realized that in as much as ethical intuitionists differ among themselves, they all agree that morality is autonomous: that there must be at least one primitive ethical term that is the vehicle for a non-natural quality, relation or concept. This primitive ethical term is indefinable, and the reality it stands for is an objective reality that we must cognize directly. We cannot prove that there is such a reality or confirm or disconfirm its existence by empirical observation. We are either directly aware of it or we are not. It is in this manner that we gain or have fundamental knowledge of good and evil.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Worthy of note is the fact that despite the few mentioned criticism and similar criticism of an intuitionists ethics, we can still ask whether, it is possible to remove all intuition from ethics, certainly we shall remove intuition in the sense of hunches and guesses, in the sense of a special faculty for the perception of morals and in the sense of a direct apprehension of moral rules immediately applicable to particular actions. These illegitimate uses of intuition have tended to ruin the whole concept.

However, there remains a legitimate use. Not all knowledge can be derived from previous knowledge. There must be some original knowledge, some primitive experience, immediate apprehension from which derived knowledge can originate. Thus not all knowledge can be the result of a reasoning process. Premises are proved by previous premises and these by others still more previous. But the process cannot go on forever or nothing will ever be proved. Somewhere one must come to direct experience (and this is intuition in the original meaning of the term) or to some principle that cannot be proved and needs no proof because it is self- evident.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup>R.HARRISON, “Meta-ethics,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 588-589.

<sup>ii</sup>Cf. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012), p. 385.

<sup>iii</sup>Cf. Price, Richard, *A Review of the Principle Questions in Morals*, in *The British Moralists 1650–1800, II*, D. D. Raphael (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p.159.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Chudnoff, E, *Intuition*, Oxford: (Oxford University Press. 2013)

<sup>vi</sup> W. D. Ross, “The Basis of Objective Judgements in Ethics”, *International Journal of Ethics*, 37 (2002), 113.

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Price, Richard, Op; Cit p. 160.

<sup>viii</sup>Cf. W. D. Ross *The Right and the Good*, Stratton-Lake, P. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2002, p.30.

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. Ibid. p.121

<sup>x</sup> Cf. John Locke, Op; Cit. p, 139.

<sup>xi</sup> Price, Richard, p.187.

<sup>xii</sup> W. D. Ross, Op; Cit ,p. 29.

<sup>xiii</sup> Broad, C. D, “Are There Synthetic A Priori Truths?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 15 (1936), 102–3.

<sup>xiv</sup> Shafer-landau, Op; Cit. 247.

<sup>xv</sup> Audi. R, “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 11 (2008), 478.

<sup>xvi</sup> Cf. Sidgwick, H, *The Methods of Ethics*, ( London: Macmillan.1967,p. 338)

<sup>xvii</sup> Cf. shang Nelson, Rudiments of ordinary level logic,(Bamenda, Destiny print 2014), p.84.

<sup>xviii</sup>Cf. Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology”, in Terry Horgan &Mark Timmons (eds.), *Metaethics After Moore*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,2006), pp. 184–186.

<sup>xix</sup> Cf. Audi. R, op; cit. pp. 33–36.

<sup>xx</sup> Cf. Huemer, Michael, *Ethical Intuitionism*, (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

<sup>xxi</sup> Cf. Robert Audi, Op; Cit. p.48.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cf. Ani Samuel O, SUREGUIDE; your trusted material for PGDE, (Nigeria: sure Guide learning and computers limited 2019) p. 211.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cf. ibid.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Cf. Khan Julius Muluh, *INTERGRATED PHILOSOPHY For Adanced Level* , (Bamenda: White House Edited Press 2014),p.192.

<sup>xxv</sup> Cf. Samuel. Stumpf, Socrates To Sartre And Beyond; A History Of Philosophy, (New York: Mcgraw- Hill, 2008),pp.275-276.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Cf. Austine. Fagothey, Rights and Reason: Ethic in Theory and Practice. (U.S.A: tan books 2000), p.114.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Cf. ibid.



<sup>xxviii</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>xxix</sup> Cf. Chidiebere Obi, *Elementary Ethics For Beginner*,(Mama Believe Digital Printing, 2019), P. 49.

<sup>xxx</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Cf. ibid

<sup>xxxii</sup> Boethius, *Contra Eutichen et Nestorium*, c. 4, in B. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, Rome 1991, 247.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Cf. K NIELSEN, “Meta-Ethics” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3,128.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Cf. Austine. Fagothey, op; cit. pp, 114-115.